

## Causing discord is a full-time occupation

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## Causing discord is a full-time occupation

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### Summary

It scared him—seeing Dream like this scared him. He was never supposed to be this... vulnerable.

The dagger in his hands was much heavier now. It would take one swing to finish Dream off. In the state he was in, he'd never be able to deflect it.

And yet, George was transfixed in place.

“Sorry,” Dream murmured, and it was so quiet George had to step forward a bit to hear. “I just didn’t... know where else to go.”

His last words were nothing more than a breath, and with them, his legs buckled under him, letting his body fall.

Or, Dream gets injured and shows up at George's doorstep. This wasn't in the hunters' manual.

### Notes

sir please this is my emotional support trope

you know the drill, the moment they're not okay with it, this is going poof :))

# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

George hated times like these. At first, he'd hoped it would just be a couple of days. Maybe a week at most. But the fourth one was ending and they still hadn't picked up a trail. They had lost him somewhere to the east of the Rivolza river, and hadn't been able to recover since, which was not doing wonders for any of their nerves. Still, they had to keep moving, keep predicting, and, according to Bad (who, let's be honest, was the only one who knew how to do this whole predicting thing), scouring this town's area was their best bet right now. Something about triangulation, convenience, maybe even the wind, hell if George knew at this point. It had always worked in the past, surely this time would be the same.

Nevertheless, it was a little past ten in the evening on their fifth day staying at this village, and everyone's patience was growing thin. If he had to guess, they'd be on the move again soon. George would miss the commodities of living under a warm roof, safe from the outside's dangers, but he had never been one to enjoy sitting still for long. Didn't do well for his frustration.

This day had been particularly sour, as they had begun running out of coin and someone had to stay behind in town to try to earn some. George, of course, drew the short end of the stick, so whilst Bad and Sapnap were out in the woods searching for any sort of trail of their target, George was stuck pulling sacks of potatoes and fixing roofs. Didn't do well for his frustration, too. At least the people were nice.

When dark clouds had begun gathering, threatening to burst at any moment, George had decided to call it a day. Tired and annoyed, he was more than happy to finally flop down on the couch of their rented house and groan to the silent walls. They probably judged him. Or pitied. He wished he could tell the walls to knock it off, he'd groan all he wished.

Not that they would listen.

He was losing his mind, apparently.

Sometime between wondering whether any of this was worth it anymore and what to eat for breakfast, he got a visitor. A young page, delivering a message from Bad and Sapnap. They'd decided to stay out late in town and wander through some inns, try to see if any new information had come up. If any information had come up. They'd take *"Yeah, my blind son saw some broken twigs like ten miles to the north"* by this point. More alone time for him, then. Good. He could continue being tired and annoyed in peace.

Minutes passed, gentle droplets drummed against the window, and George was beginning to grow sleepy. It was nearing eleven, and he was exhausted. He couldn't be bothered to move from the couch to his bed, and he figured Sapnap and Bad wouldn't mind if he crashed there for tonight. His back would hate him tomorrow, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

Visions swam behind his eyelids, and he was moments away from going under, when a series of soft knocks rattled him awake. Sighing, George pulled himself up and made his way towards the door. Did they forget their keys or something? Both of them? He'd believe Sapnap would, but Bad? Never. Maybe another page then. Who the hell even ran this late, though. A beggar? A sale-merchant who didn't understand waking people up near-midnight wasn't the best business practice?

All these options were viable. He would have accepted any of them, complained a bit, and went back to sleep.

He had failed to consider the non-viable options, though.

With a yawn, he opened the door.

A bloodied mask he hadn't seen in nearly a month greeted him.

Flight or fight ignited, and George jumped back, the dagger he always carried with him out and in front, ready to lash out at a moment's notice. All remains of sleep had vanished, replaced by a thundering in his ears and a clench of his chest. Thoughts raced a million miles per second, too quick for him to catch onto anything substantial or useful, only screams of *what what what the fuck what* —

Before he could voice anything, though, the figure spoke:

“Hey, George,” he rasped out, barely audible, and yet George could still hear a fucking *smile* in his voice.

Yeah, this was definitely who he thought it was.

Not how he'd last seen him, though. Far from it.

He was *wrecked*.

“What the hell are you doing here, Dream?” he demanded, and though he made sure to sound aggressive, he couldn't help but let confusion seep inside and replace part of his fear.

Dream was leaning against the door frame with his arm, his breaking laboured, shaking from head to toe and absolutely soaked in blood. It took George a frightening moment to realize it was his own blood, evident by the large gashes on his chest and down his abdomen, his much-too-familiar clothes in tatters. Light rain mixed with the red running down his other arm and axe, one that he was barely holding onto, and dripped onto the pavement. He had let that happen perhaps twice in their entire hunt. Blood was far too easy to track, and here he was drenched in it, leaving a clear trail right to George's house.

It scared him—seeing Dream like this scared him. He was never supposed to be this... *vulnerable*.

The dagger in his hands was much heavier now. It would take one swing to finish Dream off. In the state he was in, he'd never be able to deflect it.

And yet, George was transfixed in place.

“Sorry,” Dream murmured, and it was so quiet George had to step forward a bit to hear. “I just didn't... know where else to go.”

His last words were nothing more than a breath, and with them, his legs buckled under him, letting his body fall. George had half a mind to let him hit the ground, but before that thought could fully register, he was already catching him. God, he was *heavy*, though, and only through George's sheer willpower did both of them not topple down.

Dream was out by that point, leaving behind a panicked George to deal with what that entailed.

...What the hell had he gotten himself into?

His mind was too much of a mess to make sense of anything, so George had to focus on one thing at a time. Currently, his position. The door was still open, and he was holding onto an unconscious bloodied man for everyone to see. That wasn't ideal, so he had to either throw Dream out or drag him in. Both options were terrible for different reasons, but the former would no doubt bring unwanted attention and questions he couldn't answer, so he chose the one that would at least give him some time to process things. With a grunt, he stumbled backwards, taking Dream with him, until they were in far enough. He lowered Dream to the ground and quickly closed the door, locking it. Alright, mission one complete.

Now he had a bleeding-to-death guy in his hallway. Not just any guy, too.

Fucking *Dream*.

The person he and his team had been hunting for over a *year*.

The one target that couldn't stay still long enough for any of them to do any real damage, one that weaved through the trees with barely any effort, laughing, mocking them in that insufferable voice of his when they couldn't keep up.

The man that made George want to rip his hair out and scream until his throat got raw. He'd made them waste over a year of their lives, all the while treating it all some sort of twisted game.

And now the bastard had the *audacity* to come at George's doorstep all beaten and proclaim the sappiest shit ever.

"*Didn't know where else to go*"? What the hell was that? Did he take George for a goddamn nurse? Even on his deathbed, Dream found a way to insult George, and he wished to just *let the fucker get what he deserved*.

But then, he remembered the spiders and the poison and the cave, and he frowned.

Things could never be that simple.

The clock read a quarter past eleven. Sapnap and Bad shouldn't be back for awhile still. If they decided to stroll back right around now, George would be in some hot water. Especially considering what he'd decided on doing behind their backs.

Cursing, George began dragging Dream towards the bathroom. He cringed at the trail of blood that was leaving behind, but he'd have to get back to it later. Once finally inside, he laid Dream on the floor and took a moment to catch his breath. He had no idea how the guy managed to be this annoyingly agile with such a tall body. Apparently, though, this time his quick steps had failed to save him.

What could have possibly caused this much damage to *Dream*?

He'd make sure to find out once (if) he woke up. He'd make sure to find out some other things, too.

Now, George was no medic, but being a hunter for the better part of his life came with having to know at least the basics of treating wounds and the like. And with how often they'd had to fend off mobs or survive encounters with people such as Dream, they'd made sure to have enough supplies, too. The prospect of using a large part of those on the man who was the main reason they even needed this much was, to put it mildly, irksome, but George didn't have much of a choice. He'd already decided he wasn't going to let this bastard die, might as well go all the way.

Using a pair of scissors he found amongst the bandages, he began peeling off the ruined clothes to reveal the full extent of the wounds. Oh, they were *bad*. The largest one stretched across his entire chest down his abdomen with a few others littered around it, mainly on the ribcage. George worried whether they'd hit any organs, like his lungs. That seemed possible, and he had been breathing weirdly, but would he have even been breathing if he had a punctured lung? Maybe stitches and bandages wouldn't be enough, maybe he should get a healing potion, they still had a few from the last purchase—

George stilled.

What was he even thinking about?

If Dream went and got his stomach sliced or something, that was none of George's concern. He could treat the flesh wounds, but, again, he was no *nurse*, and he wasn't about to waste precious potions on his goddamn foe.

Now more annoyed at himself than anything, George began working on stopping the bleeding, cleaning the wounds and sewing up the biggest ones. The somewhat unsteady rising and falling of Dream's chest assured George it was going fine so far, but he couldn't know how much blood he'd lost and whether it wasn't fatal. He tried to keep his thoughts from wandering there and instead let Dream's ragged breathing, an undeniable sign of life, calm his rigid nerves.

As much as he cursed Dream out, it would just be unfortunate if he died like this.

He huffed. What an odd thought. Must be the stress. He couldn't be blamed, he had already been exhausted, and then Dream decided to fall into his arms. Anyone wouldn't be in their right mind in this predicament.

...But it would be unfortunate. He'd fantasized about seizing Dream up many times, played out many scenarios in his head, each more outlandish than the last. It would always be dramatic, this grand moment, when they'd finally taken the Great Dream down. They'd bring him back to their hometown, in shackles and defeated, and people would gather around, in awe, welcoming them with cheers. How was he supposed to get his triumphant victory if Dream died in such a pathetic way, on the bathroom floor of his hunters whilst one of them was trying to save him? They couldn't even take the credit for it, too. That just wasn't acceptable. George did not spend over a year of his life for a prize that was going to slip through his fingers this easily.

So he worked. He disinfected the wounds, made careful and precise stitches, wrapped the bandages around his torso and arms with generosity, making sure it was all snug.

All so later he could inflict the cuts himself.

And if he put more care into it than necessary, it was a secret between him and the bathroom walls.

Once there was nothing more he could do, George leaned back against the counter with a sigh. Even with most of the blood gone, Dream still didn't look right. All the neat white bandages didn't look right on him. He wasn't supposed to have this many bandages. He wasn't... He wasn't supposed to be this uncovered. When was the last time someone had seen him without all of his leather and belts and compartments and gloves? Was that even allowed? Was it allowed for him to have this much exposed skin?

George's breath caught in his throat at the last thought, and he snapped his head away, swearing.

Of course he had *skin*. Even if sometimes it didn't look like it, Dream was human, like the rest of

them. There was nothing surprising about him having a human body.

He sat in silence like this for a couple of moments, occasionally glancing at Dream, having no idea what he was supposed to do now. It was only when he realized the air had grown quieter did he notice Dream's chest was rising less. Dread prickled at George's senses and he bit into his lower lip, shutting his eyes. Technically, he had done enough. He had done more than enough, he'd argue. If Dream had come to him too late and had lost too much blood, that wasn't his fault, that wasn't his responsibility, he'd done all he could, and that was that, his conscience was clear.

And yet, as the silence grew more silent with each beat, George's heart stuttered more, until he couldn't take it anymore. He shot up from the ground and bolted out of the room towards their stash of equipment in a closet in the living room. It took him a few moments to find the potions, and he snatched one with the right label. Thank god for labels, he couldn't afford messing up because his eyes refused to work properly. He ran back to the bathroom and got down by Dream's head.

There were a few times in the past when one of their teammates would get unconscious and be injured enough for a potion, so George knew how to administer one without drowning the person. Issue was, usually headwear wouldn't be part of the equation.

Logically, George knew he could just take the obnoxious smiling mask off.

His hands lingered by its edges.

Dream wouldn't know. He'd wouldn't need to know. So what if George saw his face? It wasn't the end of the world. He didn't know why the guy was so adamant on hiding behind a mask, anyway. Everyone knew him by it far better than they would by his face. It wasn't a big deal.

His fingers gripped the borders.

And if George has been curious about what the infamous Dream looked like ever since he'd laid eyes on him, even if he'd never voiced it out loud, so what? He was trying to save his life for god's sake, surely that made him deserving of at least seeing the man's face?

Time was running out. George cursed himself for the umpteenth time this evening.

Slowly, he moved the mask up just enough to expose Dream's mouth. Morality and principles aside, he did need access to it for the potion. Dream would understand.

George shouldn't care whether Dream would understand.

He should focus on the matter at hand.

He began trickling the potion down Dream's throat through his parted lips, holding his head up in a secure position. If someone would walk in on him in this instant, he'd have no explanation. That was what he'd say, *I don't know. He was dying. I didn't want him to.* Whether that excuse would pass, he wasn't sure. Hopefully, he wouldn't need to cross that bridge.

Maybe George didn't need to give him the entire potion. Maybe he would have been fine with only half or something. The thought crossed his mind only when the entire thing was gone, though.

He was exhausted and stressed, and he couldn't focus and couldn't think.

It was fine. No one needed to know.

(Oh, if only walls could talk.)

A drop of bright liquid had gathered by the corner of Dream's lip. George went to wipe it away, slow. He let his fingers linger, right by the outline of the rosy pink.

*Huh. Pretty.*

His mind caught up then.

As if burned, George snatched his hand away and shuffled the mask back in place, quick to scramble to his feet and away from Dream.

There, done. He'd done literally as he could now.

George ignored the rising to his face heat with pointed aggression.

Exhaustion and stress. Exhaustion and stress.

He should leave Dream on the floor. His breathing was already getting better, he'd be fine where he was.

But the bathroom was a mess. He should clean it. That would be difficult to do with Dream laying in the middle of it.

And so, with a lot of grunting and swearing, George managed to transfer him to the couch where his body barely fit along its length. He had to hope any residue blood wouldn't leak through the bandages and taint the fabric. That'd be a pain to get out.

With that accomplished, George stared at the still unconscious Dream for a good minute, and, seeing no signs of the man waking up anytime soon, moved to clean the mess he'd left behind in the corridor and bathroom. It all looked like a damn murder scene. George had never been afraid or unsettled by blood, but the vibrant red trail and splotches against the bright wood still left a foul taste in his mouth. It was baffling how Dream had even managed to make it this far with such injuries.

By now the drizzle had grown into a steady pour. Usually George despised the rain, it messed with their tracking, but now he thanked the gods for this blessing. It'd wipe away the red outside leading to George's door, taking care of at least one headache. Many more remained, though.

Once he was done with cleaning and after making sure Dream was still out, George turned to rummaging through his stuff still laying on the bathroom's floor. Most of the clothes were in ruins and wouldn't serve any purpose anymore, but the equipment and supplies were all intact. The axe, the annoying crossbow Dream was far too fond of, some arrows, matches, berries, dried meat, a hunting knife, several ender pearls, and more junk George paid no attention to. It was strangely underwhelming. He didn't know what he'd expected, but everything Dream had was just... regular survivalist things. No magic potions, enchanted weaponry, nothing fancy.

It was irritating. Perhaps a bit impressive, too, but George wouldn't admit it out loud.

There was a noticeable lack of the shield Dream would always have on his person, though. That made him wonder.

George gathered all the items and went upstairs to his room to hide them. He wasn't yet sure what he was going to do about them, but there was no way he was leaving any weapons around for Dream to use when he'd decide he didn't need George's *services* anymore.



Another spark of annoyance ignited. He was *not* a caretaker, much less a friend who'd be happy to help him out. Dream had no right to drop himself onto George like that and expect him to be okay with it.

Back in the living room, George took a seat by the opposite wall, prepared to wait until Dream woke up. He refused to consider what he'd do if Sapnap and Bad came back before George solved this problem. Or maybe that'd be for the better. Surely they'd understand why he didn't let their target die like that, and be more than happy that their hunt had finally come to an end. If not somewhat disappointed by the way it did.

Whatever, not an issue he had to deal with at the moment.

Anxious, he toyed with the dagger in his hands. Each passing minute put a larger strain on his nerves. He didn't have a plan, no idea what he was going to do next, only a hope he'd be able to make up something on the fly. What would Dream try to do? Maybe he should have tied him up, how come he hadn't considered that before, there was some rope among their supplies, it wouldn't take long to get it—

Before he could finish that thought, a quiet groan broke the silence, and George froze. He watched as Dream began stirring, movements stiff and groggy as he tried to pull himself up, hissing in pain whenever he moved too quickly. It didn't take long for his wandering look to land on George at the other side of the room.

He stilled.

"...George," he murmured, voice scratched, half in astonishment, half in relief.

Relief had no business being present there.

"Dream," George responded, fully cold. Because coldness was the only thing that belonged here. "Haven't seen you in awhile."

A breathless laugh filled the air as Dream continued moving into a sitting position, careful. "Yeah, I'd gotten you good, huh? You looked like a pack of lost puppies."

George wanted to bite back but kept his mouth shut. Getting angry would lead him nowhere.

"Much good that did you," he muttered, making a point of trailing his eyes down the many bandages.

"I guess that's fair," Dream said, and George could almost see the sheepish smile behind the mask. "I'll make sure to not separate too much from your group next time. Don't wanna meet an actual challenge again."

George gripped the dagger tighter, jaw clenched.

"There won't be a next time, Dream."

A beat passed.

Dream chuckled.

"You say that," he started, slow, "yet I'm not seeing any bounds. I was surprised, actually, but you've always been the overconfident type, huh?"

George quirked a brow, huffing, as he stood up and paced up to Dream. “*I’m* the overconfident one? You were literally bleeding out on my floor like half an hour ago. You’re not going anywhere with those injuries, unless you want to end up unconscious again.”

He held in a cringe at Dream’s comment, though. He really should have tied him up. Not that he could let Dream know he considered that a mistake.

“Wanna bet?” Dream asked, a grin evident in his voice.

*Oh, go to hell.*

Before Dream could react, George had his dagger pressed against his exposed throat as he leaned in close, supporting his weight on the wall with his free arm, one knee perched on the couch next to Dream. Satisfaction flooded his system at how Dream froze up.

He brought his face mere inches from Dream’s mask, eyes narrowing. “I know where every single wound on your body is,” he spoke, voice hushed. “Don’t think I’d hesitate to cut them all open again just because you proclaimed some shit about needing my help.”

Dream exhaled a shuddering breath. “That wasn’t—”

“Wasn’t *what*, Dream? You’re gonna say you didn’t go all “*Oh George, save me!*”?” He went up an octave. “Well, I did, but what happens next isn’t my problem, so I’d suggest you don’t be an idiot and make all my efforts go to waste.”

The air between them was suffocating. Both were still as statues, waiting for the other’s move. One beat, and the blade could draw blood. Dream swallowed, and George’s eyes followed the movement before snapping back up.

With a slow sigh, Dream pressed back against the couch, putting some distance between his skin and the knife.

“Alright, Georgie,” he murmured, chuckling. He brought his hand up and gave the dagger a gentle push away. George let him. “Have it your way.”

George frowned. Dream was only entertaining George, that much was obvious, but it was as much as he could hope to get from this stuck-up asshole. Still, he made sure to dig into the cut on Dream shoulder as he pulled back, not enough to reopen the wound, but enough to let him know he wasn’t fucking around. Dream gasped at the pain, his hand shooting up to grip the wound, agonized hisses leaving his lips.

“I know you take me for a joke, Dream,” George spoke, straightening. “But you *will* eventually regret it.”

Dream took a moment to catch his breath before tilting his head to the side, questioning.

“I don’t take you for a joke.”

“Right, because you just go around falling into your hunters’ arms for fun,” George scoffed.

“Speaking of which, what do you mean, didn’t know where else to go? There’s literally a medic down the street.”

“I can’t trust them,” Dream grumbled.

“And you can trust me?”

Dream shifted in his seat, still cradling his shoulder. A few moments of silence passed.

Finally, he spoke, "I'm still alive, aren't I? You helped me, so I don't understand what you don't understand."

He did have a point, George had to admit, even if it tasted sour.

"And," Dream tasted his mouth. "Did you give me a *potion*?"

George bit into his lip and turned away, folding and unfolding his arms. He hated the way Dream's stare bore into him, fiery. He shouldn't need to defend himself, and yet he could feel the way Dream's face was stretching into a grin and he hated it.

"You were dying," he settled on muttering, still refusing to look at him.

"Awh, George," Dream *cooed*. "It's almost as if you care."

George rolled his eyes, the mere thought ridiculous.

"Don't flatter yourself, Dream," he said as he went back to his seat, observing Dream's movements from the corner of his eye. "I would have been dead, too, with all those spiders, if you hadn't—" He cut himself off in favor of grimacing. "This is just me repaying my debt. We're even now."

"Huh. Right, I remember that. Didn't think you would. You were pretty out of it."

Dream sounded strange. He couldn't quite pin-point in what way, though.

"Just the gist of it," George mumbled. "Not really anything... Whatever, doesn't matter."

Why had Dream gone to him then if he wasn't counting on George returning the favor?

He didn't voice that thought, though.

"So if next time I—"

"What did I just say?"

"Okay, *hypothetically speaking*, if next time I show up all bloodied, you won't help me?"

A pause.

"No."

The pause had been too long for either of them to believe George's answer.

Dream shrugged. "Alright, fair enough."

Yeah, they were even. George didn't owe him anything anymore. He could sleep peacefully again. Yeah.

"Say," Dream started again, in a stranger tone than before. He lifted his hand to touch his mask. "If you gave me a potion, did you—"

"No," George cut him off. He blinked in confusion at the unprompted urgency, before settling down with a cough. "No. Just enough to..." He made a vague gesture towards his mouth. "Yeah."

"Ah. Okay."

“Mhm.”

“...Why not, though?”

George furrowed his brows, staring at Dream in question. “Sorry?”

“You could have, why didn’t you?”

George wasn’t sure.

Or, rather, he wouldn’t admit the truth.

“What, is respecting one’s privacy such a foreign concept to you?”

That seemed like an adequate enough answer.

“It is to most people.”

“I’m not most people.”

“So I’ve noticed,” Dream laughed. “I’m not used to such consideration.”

George scrunched his face up in distaste. “Don’t give me compliments, it’s weird.”

“Too bad,” Dream sighed, all dramatic. What was that supposed to mean? “Anyway, my throat’s killing me, do you think you could get me some water?”

On some level, George admired Dream’s unwavering confidence. On all others, it was just infuriating.

“Dream. I am not your goddamn caretaker.”

“Oh c’mon, George, please? Don’t be mean.”

“I am literally the nicest person ever. You just don’t deserve to experience it.”

“George, *please*, I am *dying* over here,” Dream whined, dragging his words out like some sort of child. “I thought you didn’t want me to *die*.”

“I’m reconsidering.”

“George, I am begging you—”

“Alright, stop crying,” George snapped. “God, you are insufferable.”

Dream giggled, and George wanted to throw something at him. At himself, too, because that laugh was *not* cute, he refused to even consider the thought, his mind should *shut up*.

He went to fetch two glasses, one for himself, and filled them with water. He didn’t want to turn his back to Dream, but he’d figured he’d hear any suspicious movements, so he let Dream drink in peace.

(He couldn’t get Dream’s words out of his head. About him being considerate. He should not be coming across as considerate to his fucking *target*. What was wrong with him?)

“Thanks,” Dream sighed as he gave the glass back.

George chewed on his cheek, fingers drumming against the kitchen's countertop in rapid succession. This all thing was far, far too domestic.

"This is so stupid," he muttered.

Dream turned to look at him. "No, I don't think it is."

"How is any of this not stupid?"

He hummed, swaying his head from side to side, thinking. "Well, it's like a little truce," he finally proclaimed, smiling. "Those are nice once in awhile."

"Yeah, well, don't get too comfortable." George rolled his eyes. "We're not—"

The sound of a rattling door lock cut him off, and George snapped his attention to the entrance. With rising horror, he realized Sapnap and Bad must be back from their outing.

He'd left the keys in the door by accident. They couldn't unlock it.

Maybe there was a god.

"Shit," he cursed, moving to pull Dream from the couch. "C'mon, let's go, they can't see you here."

Dream remained silent as he leaned against George, arm around his shoulder, and the two of them stumbled their way towards the stairs. At least he didn't need to drag the guy this time, that would have been a pain. Still, with how unsteady Dream was on his feet, most of the work fell on George, and his fatigued state was not helping.

"George?" He heard Sapnap call from outside. "The door's stuck!"

"Ju-Just a minute!" he yelled back.

"Yeah, take your time, it's totally not pouring or anything!"

"Petulant," Dream snickered by his ear.

"Shut up and walk," George hissed.

With much effort, they made it upstairs and all but fell into George's room. He released Dream, who steadied himself by one of the cabinets, and pointed at him, eyes narrowed.

"Do. Not. Move."

Before Dream had a chance to respond, George shut the door and raced down the stairs. With shaking hands, he unlocked the door and was met with his soaked-to-the-bone friends, less than in high spirits.

"Finally, oh my god," Sapnap huffed, scrambling inside to get out of the rain along with Bad. "What were you doing?"

"I was—um—in the, uh—bathroom?"

George could barely contain himself from cringing at the shitty excuse. He shut the door and turned to face their quizzical looks.

“Why are you out of breath?” Bad asked as he took off his wet jacket.

“I was...” A pause. “Exercising?”

That shouldn’t have sounded like a question.

“In the bathroom?”

“Yup.”

Another pause.

“Alright, George,” Sapnap dragged. Yeah, neither of them believed him, but they didn’t push either, so George would take it.

“Did you, uh, did you find anything?” George asked, desperate for any sort of topic that’d turn the attention away from him, as they went to retrieve some towels from the infamous bathroom.

“Ugh, no,” Sapnap groaned, drying his hair with more force than necessary. “This town’s absolutely useless. A bunch of drunkards and nothing else.”

“That’s not very nice, Sapnap, there were plenty of lovely people,” Bad chastised him. “They just... Didn’t have much to say. Sorry, guys, I must have miscalculated,” he finished, dejected.

*You really did not. Oh, how much you did not.* “It’s okay, Bad, it was worth a shot anyway. Maybe he hasn’t even gotten here yet.”

“Doubtful, he probably took a different route,” Bad sighed. He threw his towel over the door and shook his head. “I’ll take another look at the map tonight. Try to find a new path.”

“Don’t overwork yourself, you should rest first.” George remembered the ghastly wounds. “Hey, did you hear anything about... I don’t know, some potential danger outside? Like, more than usual?”

“I don’t think so?” Sapnap’s face twisted in thought. “The people seem chill, not scared or anything. Why?”

“Just... being safe, I guess.”

The two of them gave George a weird look but didn’t comment further.

“Anyway, I’m starving,” Sapnap proclaimed and began making his way to the kitchen, the other two following him. “You had dinner already, George?”

“Ah, no, I kind of... Forgot about it.” He’d had some more pressing matters at hand. “But I wouldn’t mind something, I suppose.”

“I think we have some eggs and milk left, I can make omelet,” Bad chirped, already gathering the products.

Yeah, *this* was familial. Usually having Sapnap and Bad around eased his nerves in all situations, but now he couldn’t force his heart out of his throat as his thoughts kept wandering upstairs.

Oh. Hold on. He’d stashed Dream’s equipment there. Right. He had... forgotten about that.

Goddammit. He was going to die tonight, wasn’t he.

“Hey, George?” Sapnap pulled him out of his frenzied mind, and he turned to look at him. Sapnap was holding up the two glasses, brow raised in question, a teasing smile on his lips. “Had a guest over?”

He needed to fix his memory, how could he have forgotten about the *damn glasses no one uses two when you're alone at least not for water*

“No,” he answered immediately, voice higher than he would have liked. “Those are both mine.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I was lazy and didn’t want to wash them.”

“They only had water in them.”

“I was very lazy.”

“George.”

“What?”

Sapnap opened his mouth to continue, but a muffled thud sounded from above them and attracted his attention instead.

*Oh for fuck’s sake what the hell is that idiot doing I am going to die*

“They’re still here?” Sapnap half-whispered, half-shouted, trying to hold back laughter.

“No, there’s no one here, it was—pigeons,” George stammered out, and even he could tell that was a bullshit explanation, but that was the best he could come up with in his current state.

Never before had he hated his inability to lie so bad.

“Did you make a friend?” Bad asked as he scrambled the eggs, delighted.

“No,” George huffed, the mere thought outrageous.

“Some company for the night, then?” Sapnap snickered. Of course he was having a field trip with this situation.

“Absolutely not!” he snapped too loudly, but heat was rising and if he denied it with enough vigor, they’d believe him, because that was how things worked.

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about, George,” Bad spoke in that soothing voice of his, smiling. Damn Bad and how it was impossible to ever get mad at him. “I think it’s important to rewind once in awhile. Did someone catch your eye while you were out in town today?”

“Ugh, oh my god, just—” George buried his burning face in his hands. “Shut up, oh my god.”

On the bright side, at least if they thought he had *company for the night* over, they wouldn’t try going to his room. And maybe it was better for them to believe this outlandish scenario rather than... Yeah, whatever the hell the truth was.

“Alright, alright, we’ll lay off you for now,” Sapnap chuckled, bringing his hands up in surrender. “I just have one question.”

George peeked at him through his fingers, daring him to continue.

“Are they hot?”

That earned Sapnap a hard punch, and he jumped back, clenching his shoulder and laughing. “I’m gonna take that as a “yes”.”

“I hate you,” George muttered. “You are literally the worst.”

“You love me.”

“I really don’t.”

“Alright, you two, I’m almost done, so stop fighting,” Bad cut off whatever Sapnap was planning on saying in response. The egg and milk mix was already sizzling in the pan, filling the room with a savoury aroma.

“Yeah, George needs to conserve his energy.”

This time, Sapnap managed to dodge the attack, which only widened the stupid grin on his face.

“Feisty today, I see. I dig it.”

“I am going to murder you in your sleep.”

“Knock it off, both of you!” Bad stressed. “Sapnap, stop aggravating George.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll stop,” Sapnap said, still snickering. “I just didn’t expect this from *George* of all people.”

“What is that even supposed to—”

“Dinner’s done!” Bad proclaimed over the two of them as he placed the plates down on the table louder than needed. “I also left some for your—” Cough. “—pigeons.”

George groaned, sinking into a chair by his portion. “Bad, seriously, this really is not—”

“I insist. I don’t want to come across as unwelcoming hosts.” He beamed.

Separating himself from reality for a moment, George had to admit, the situation was comical. Them preparing food for *Dream* sounded as right as Bad cursing. They did not go together under any circumstances, and if George was any less stressed out, he would have laughed at the absurdity.

“Thanks for the dinner,” George grumbled once he’d shoved everything down. “I’ll... be going then.”

“Don’t forget to bring some food with you, too.”

“And have fun!”

He really, *really* hated everything about his predicament.

George hoped by the time he made it back to his room, the color of his face had settled back down into a neutral one. He also hoped that his head wasn’t going to be chopped off the moment he opened the door, but at this point, that wouldn’t be so bad.



No such thing happened, though. Instead, George found Dream sitting crossed-legged on the mattress, reading some book he must have found amongst the sparse bookshelves.

George took a moment to appreciate how bizarre this sight was. He'd only ever seen Dream as he was either jumping over rocks and weaving between trees or when he was swinging his axe at him, intent on cutting off a limb or two. Always on the move, always fighting, always slipping through their fingers. He'd hadn't been able to take a good look at the guy before, and now he was all curled up on George's bed without a care in the world, half-naked.

That last thought invited the heat back, but George chose to ignore it to spare his already frenzied heart.

Upon his entry, Dream lifted his head to meet George's eyes, and he despised the way Dream didn't as much as tense up.

(For more reason than one, but he wouldn't say it.)

"Bad made dinner for you," George finally spoke, careful to keep his voice neutral. He walked over and handed the plate to Dream. "Says he doesn't want to be unwelcoming or whatever."

"That's very nice of him," Dream laughed in surprise, amused. "Tell him I send my regards. Unless it's poisoned."

"It's not. I would have looked very suspicious if I tried poisoning a guest's food."

Dream stared at him for a moment before shrugging and bringing a scoop under his mask. "Fair enough."

George leaned back against the door, arms crossed, and watched him for a short while. He was quite good at eating with that gnarly mask on.

"What even was that sound?" George broke the silence. "Thought you were supposed to be sneaky or something."

Dream paused in between his bites.

"I fell."

"I... simply do not believe that."

"Can't do much to change that."

George waited for him to elaborate, which he didn't. Of course he didn't.

"They think I have a lover up here," he said before his mind could catch up to his mouth. "Or 'company for the night', as Sapnap put it."

Dream had been in the middle of swallowing, and now he was in the middle of choking. He placed the fork down in favor of bringing his hand over his mouth, trying to regain his breath, coughing quietly.

"You good?" George asked, and though he tried to come across as nonchalant, he couldn't keep the amusement down. So even Dream could get flustered.

Dream nodded, inhaling deeply through his nose, until eventually he could breathe normally again. Or, close enough to it.

“That’s, ah—” Another cough. “That’s interesting. Close enough, I guess.”

George closed his eyes with an exasperated sigh. He could feel a headache settling in.

“It really, really is not.”

“There’s a thin line between hate and love, Georgie,” Dream remarked, and George could hear a grin in his still-mildly-scratched voice.

He sent a glare Dream’s way. “I am very far away from it, then.”

“Alright, George, then riddle me this,” Dream began as he placed the now empty plate on the nightstand. “How come I’m up in your room with your teammates having no idea if you insist this is the end of my journey? I’m sorry, but I fail to follow your logic here.”

George opened his mouth to respond, but no words came out. Shit. He had a point. To be frank, George hadn’t considered what he was doing or going to do, he just sort of... did things without thinking about it. For some reason, in the moment, hiding Dream had seemed crucial. Now, though, it didn’t make any sense if George did intend on not letting him go.

*Shit* . He didn’t have an answer.

Dream chuckled and leaned forward, resting his head in his palm. “See, George, I don’t think you *actually* want this game to end.”

“That’s just factually incorrect,” he spoke through clenched teeth. “I’ve wasted more than a year on you—I’m more than ready to be done.”

“You don’t need to lie to me.”

“What am I lying about?”

“I’m a good judge of character—I can tell you enjoy the chase just as much as I do.” Dream sighed in wonder. “Oh, if only you could see yourself, how you come *alive* when our blades clash, when you barely miss my arrows, when I’m just out of your reach. It’s addicting. You’re addicting.”

The way George’s heart was thundering was near painful. Dream spoke in such awe that it left tingles all across his skin, electrifying his every nerve. The sensation wasn’t unpleasant, and George had no idea what to do with that realization. He was scared to breathe—scared he’d shudder and give away that Dream was affecting him. Scared he’d then know all about the thoughts that’d circulate late at night, when he’d let his mind wander, hidden away by darkness. He’d never entertain them during the day because they were outrageous, untrue and dangerous, but sometimes, rationality melted away and for only a few moments, he’d grasp at them.

Now was not one of those times, there was too much light, so George swallowed them down and relaxed his shoulders, rolling his eyes.

“Oh *Dream*, have you fallen for me?” he mocked. “That’d just be unfortunate. Sad, really. And you’re in way over your head if you think you know anything about me.”

Dream shrugged a beat too late. “Whatever you say, George. We both know the truth, though.”

“Do we now.” A pause. “How’d you get those injuries, anyway?”

Dream laughed. It was stiff. “That’s a bit blunt, don’t you think?”

“What, touchy subject?”

“No,” he scoffed.

“Then? What happened?”

“Wouldn’t *you* like to know.”

George stared at him in mild annoyance. Dream’s voice had gained a strange hostility, but that wasn’t going to deter him. “Yeah, I would, actually. Don’t I deserve *something* for literally saving your ass?”

“You said it yourself—a favor for a favor. So I don’t get what you’re expecting,” he declared, pointed and cold.

Definitely a touchy subject. That didn’t give him any right to act this rude, though.

George tightened his lips, glancing away. He tried to ignore the stinging in his chest. “You’re such an ungrateful bastard,” he muttered. “I didn’t even get a “thank you”.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dream shift in place, turning his head away as well. The bed creaked underneath.

Dream sighed, “It’s nothing for you to worry about, alright?” His voice was slow. “It’s not a danger to you or your friends.”

“Awh, Dream, it’s almost as if you care,” George parroted Dream’s words back at him.

That earned him a lighthearted chuckle from Dream, and the stinging lessened.

“It’d be no fun if my favorite hunters got killed off like that.”

“We’re your favorite? I’m touched.”

“Of course. I especially like the way you scream,” he spoke, and the tone of those words, low and hushed, made something twist inside George’s stomach. He experienced vertigo.

“You’re ridiculous,” he mumbled, and though he had intended it to be dismissive, his voice was too breathless. “Absolutely terrible.”

“If you say so, George.”

He despised the way he said his name. He should knock it off.

“You—” George began, unsure of how to continue. He licked his lips. “You need—” Dream leaned forwards, almost inviting. “You need some fucking clothes.”

Dream laughed at that, so much so his shoulders shook, and George took the chance to cross the room to his stash where he’d kept some of his clothing. He made sure to keep his heated face away from Dream’s eyes.

“What, you—you like what you see a bit too much?” Dream kept cackling, far too amused at the situation.

“I am seriously regretting not letting you die, oh my god.”

“Oh George, c’mon, don’t be like that.”

“I will be like that.”

Dream giggled, “You’re just like how I’d imagined you be.”

“Glad you’re not disappointed,” George said, dry. “Now kindly fuck off.”

As Dream continued wheezing, George found the largest shirt he owned from his small collection (which, to be fair, was still probably too small), and threw it at Dream.

“I don’t have anything bigger.”

“That’s very kind of you, George,” Dream chirped as he pulled the shirt over his head, careful to not aggravate any of the wounds. “Dinner, clothes, I’m beginning to see a pattern here.”

George brought a hand to his temple and rubbed, shutting his eyes. This was exhausting. Dream was exhausting. He was making this more difficult than it had to be.

“Could you just... stop that?”

“Stop what?”

“You know what,” he snapped, turning to look at Dream, frowning. “I know what you’re trying to do, and it’s *not* going to work, you understand?”

“I’m... not exactly sure what you mean,” Dream chuckled, awkward, and *fuck him* and how taken aback he sounded, that just wasn’t fair, he wasn’t being fair, he had no right to act like this, like they were friends or something, and then turn around and swing his axe at him fully intent on maiming him, *he had absolutely no fucking right*

Neither did George, to be fair, but he pushed that thought far down.

“Whatever,” he murmured, too tired to argue anymore. “Just shut up.”

A tense silence settled over them. Somewhere at the back of his mind, George wondered whether Bad or Sapnap heard anything. He didn’t worry about them recognizing Dream’s voice—they hadn’t chatted much, after all. And they wouldn’t expect it either, so.

“You look sleepy,” Dream finally remarked.

George glared at him. “And what do you suggest I do about it?”

“Uh, sleep?”

“With you in the same room? Surely you can’t be serious.”

“Well I for one do wanna sleep tonight, so how about a temporary truce?” He brought a hand to his chest and made a cross over his heart. “I promise not to do anything if you don’t either.”

George had wanted nothing more than to get some rest for the last few hours, so even if he was still very much opposed to the idea, it wasn’t like he was going to get anything better.

“Alright, fine,” he sighed. “I *will* haunt you if you do decide to slit my throat.”

“Well damn, I was gonna, but ghosts terrify me.”

George's lips twitched upwards, and he covered it with a cough.

He preferred when Dream wouldn't talk to them.

"What are you doing?" Dream asked as George began pulling some bedding down.

"If you think I'm going to sleep in the same bed as you, you are insane."

"Um, shouldn't it be the other way around then?.."

George let out a long groan as he turned the light off and went to flop down on his makeshift bed, tucking his dagger under the pillow for quick access. "I may hate you, but I'm not about to force an injured man to sleep on the floor."

He didn't get a response. A few beats passed, and the bed next to him creaked as Dream laid down. That was a good sign. On the ground and in near-total darkness, George wasn't sure if he'd be able to put up a good fight if Dream decided to surprise him with an attack.

He wasn't the only one vulnerable to an attack, though, he realized with a start.

"If you hurt Sapnap or Bad," he spoke, quiet but threatening, "I *will* make sure your death is painful."

"I won't," Dream responded with a silent laugh. "That'd be douchey."

"You'd know all about that, wouldn't you."

"I'm starting to think you have a very negative image of me."

"I wonder what could have given that away," George drawled. A thought crossed his already foggy mind. "I still don't get it, though."

"What?"

"What made you think I'd help."

A pregnant pause.

"I don't know," Dream admitted, and in the night's air, between the two of them, it was almost a confession. Of what, George couldn't tell.

"Huh."

"Goodnight, George."

He didn't respond.

Realistically, neither of them should be falling asleep. Their agreement hinged only on words, and what were words in the grand scheme of things? Words were used to make yourself feel better, not something to stake your life on.

But George was tired. He was tired from working in town the entire day, and even more tired from Dream. Even if he wanted to stay awake, his body refused to.

Exhausted and stressed, and it didn't take long for him to drift to unconsciousness, soothed by Dream's soft breathing next to him.

~

He'd been dreaming of something, blurry images and sounds mixed in his mind, but the sensation of moving brought George out of his slumber. It took him several sluggish moments to realize he was no longer on the hard floor and instead in his bed, and that thought alone was enough to force his eyes open.

It was almost pitch black, the moonlight barely seeping through the drawn curtains. Still, he could make out a figure above him, pulling away, and he eventually connected the dots, however unclear they were.

"Dream?" he slurred. "What're you..."

The man froze before shushing. "Go back to sleep, George."

"Wait," he breathed out, reaching to grasp at Dream's shirt. His eyes kept shutting, far too heavy for him. "You can't... leave."

A quiet chuckle filled the air. It settled like cotton. Soft.

"And why not?"

George forced himself to look. Dream was closer. It seemed like it, anyway.

"You're impossible to find."

"Not always. Not when I don't want to be."

"Still," George grumbled. "You're so selfish."

Dream hummed in thought. Slowly, he took hold of his mask and turned it to the side, away from his face, letting it rest on the side of his head.

It was dark. Much too dark for George to make out anything apart from Dream's silhouette and the whiteness of his mask. And yet, a breath still got caught in his throat. The residue of sleep continued clinging, but the steady increase of his heartbeat was peeling its claws off one by one.

Only one coherent thought circulated in his muddled mind.

Dream had taken his mask off. Dream had taken his mask off.

His grasp on Dream's shirt (vaguely, he remembered it was his shirt, and that knowledge didn't help) tightened.

Dream leaned in, close, closer, resting his arms on the bed's headrest above and legs on either side of George, and he thought this was the closest he could get. With his heart now in his throat, eyes slowly adjusting, he could barely see the outlines of Dream's facial features. A concept of them, more than anything, and they were *so close*

He should have been feeling trapped. He literally was trapped, but.

"George," Dream whispered, and George could feel his breath on his skin, could taste it.

"Yeah?" His voice was barely a murmur.

"Thank you."

George tried to find Dream's eyes.

"You're welcome."

Time was still, then. Whatever part that was still holding onto rationality was screaming to get out of it while he still could, but it was so dark. And rationality was such a fragile thing. And like sugar in hot tea, it melted.

He dug into the fabric and pulled Dream down, closing off the gap.

At first, it was nothing more than a brush. A test. Finding the right place with nothing to go off on apart from an idea and touch. Then, Dream turned his head, a bit lower, and, on the second try, captured his lips properly.

Weirdly enough, if George hadn't been laying down, he thought he would have pushed away. There was something about the position and the hour, the sort of feeling you get between falling asleep and waking up where anything can happen, where you can say anything and when you take the most bizarre visions, sounds, sensations as truth, at face value without a shadow of a doubt. Yes, ladybugs could indeed eat you, and yes, kissing Dream was nice.

Dream moved against him, and George moved with him, because at that moment, it was the most natural thing in the world. It burned, the contact burned, and it was both too much and not enough, and George had no coherent thoughts left that'd help him figure how to make it less, so instead, he settled on not enough. He rode his hand up Dream's chest until he reached the side of his face. His fingers trailed his neck, his jaw, and finally they buried in his hair, just long enough to grip, and twisted.

A low sound, a mix of a gasp and a groan, sounded in Dream's throat, and the sensation of falling overcame George. Exhilarating and terrifying, promising either ecstasy or painful death, high risk, high reward sort of deal. Without taking it, you could never predict which outcome you'd get.

He stepped closer to the edge as Dream parted his lips, and he followed.

The burning wasn't only at the contact anymore. It spread like hellfire to the ends of his fingertips and toes, and he feared it'd make his erratic heart stop. Uncomfortable, the lack of touch was *uncomfortable*, in some areas more than others, but Dream's hands were above him, supporting his body, and if George wanted them, he'd have to voice it. The prospect was terrifying. A fragile string was holding the spell together, and if George said anything, he'd risk waking up. It was still dark, and he wished to remain under for as long as it lasted.

So he suffered, and instead with his other hand he found the end of the shirt and slipped underneath, feeling up Dream's own heated skin, mindful of the bandages. Dream broke contact then in favour of exhaling a stifled moan, and George drank it up. He chased his lips, locking them once more, and dug his nails into Dream's side, trailing up. Dream almost lost his hold on the headrest at that. In response, nipped at George's lower lip, sending a violent shudder down his spine, and deepened the kiss further.

He could barely focus on anything anymore. Everything had melted away, leaving behind only stolen breaths and scorching touches.

A dream never-ending. Even if he wanted to awaken, it was out of his control by now.

At some point, Dream pulled away from his mouth and instead moved down, leaving chaste kisses along his cheek, jaw, and down his neck. The combination of soft lips and occasional hard teeth on

his sensitive skin left him gasping for air, the hold in Dream's hair tightening.

George felt Dream smile against a spot a bit above his collarbone, sighing.

"Knew we were on the same page," he whispered, and the vibrations of Dream's voice so close choked him.

"This—This doesn't—You—" Words were failing him, his head too much of a mess to form sentences.

Dream hummed, questioning and teasing, enjoying himself.

"I still—" George swallowed through his laboured breaths. "I still hate you."

"If that means you'll continue chasing me, I'm okay with that."

Leaving him at that, Dream pushed himself away. George released his grip and let his hands fall, where Dream caught them and brought to his lips as he settled into a sitting position above George.

"You could kill me with these," he murmured, affectionate, and laid kisses on each finger.

It was impossible to tell whether he meant literally or figuratively.

*Depending on the situation*, George's mind supplied, and the thought both mortified and excited him.

"I could do more than that." He heard the words before he realized he'd said them.

Even in the dark, he could see Dream grin.

"That's something to look forward to, then."

He released his hands and got off the bed. George didn't bother moving. Instead, he closed his eyes and threw an arm over them, listening to Dream gather his things. Of course he'd found them. George couldn't bring himself to care.

Eventually, he heard the window open.

"See you next time, George."

He didn't respond.

~

In the morning, Sapnap asked how his night went. George said pigeons didn't make for good company, and Sapnap laughed.

They found a trail on their next outing.

## Chapter End Notes

yay you made it!:D it's literally exam season for me and here i am, writing dnf. life couldn't be better



thank u for reading and i'd love to hear your thoughts down in the comments!!:) i honestly have way more ideas for this specific au and trope but will i write them..... not even god knows..... just in case, though, if you want, you can subscribe:D

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

I'M BACK BITCHES AHAHAHA

Okay, listen. Honest to god, I had *not* planned to add anything more to this. Sure, I had ideas, but I would have been content with entertaining them in my head and nothing else, I didn't have the motivation to do more. But y'all just??? Completely floored me with how you responded. Like, oh my god, I definitely had not expected such a positive and warm reception. With each excited comment, my own excitement grew until it reached a point where the moment my last exam finished, I got straight to writing. Like, seriously, y'all singlehandedly gave me enough motivation to not only write another part but actually plan out an entire story?? Do you realize what kind of power you hold??? So this chapter is dedicated to all of you ♥ I write because I find it fun, sure, but this literally wouldn't be here if not for your support ♥ I'm excited to bring you more in the future as well!!

**Important notice before you continue:** this chapter is taking place a few months before the first one :) This is probably not gonna be strictly linear, so I may jump around between time points a bit. I'll let you know about it in the notes :]

Also! Only a SMALL percentage of people who read this are ACTUALLY subscribed, so if you end up enjoying the story, consider subscribing, it's FREE, and you can always change your mind later. Enjoy!!!

lol

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

For as much as Dream liked to mock his hunters, he had to admit—they were *persistent*.

Dream had had many pursuers in the past; being a fugitive for years tended to attract a lot of those. Add the ever-growing bounty on his head, and you could forget the idea of relaxing for even a minute. Not that it had ever been an issue—they'd always been the same hunter-wannabes, way in over their heads, thinking they could make a quick coin by taking out some random guy. Sometimes, Dream felt bad for them, truly. Only sometimes, though. If they couldn't figure out that a reward enough to last a man at least a decade didn't equal "some random guy", well, they had no one else to blame but themselves. Not Dream's fault they lacked any sort of foresight.

And so, Dream had gotten comfortable. Scaring off whichever assholes decided it'd be a bright idea to go against him had become somewhat of a hobby. If here and there they'd fall onto his blade by accident, well, that was the definition of self-defense, Dream would argue. Not that the court would listen. Not that there would even *be* a court.

Yeah, it wasn't relaxing, but it wasn't overly bothersome either.

Or, at least, it hadn't been.

Dream leaned against his knees, panting, as he tried to catch his breath. A dull stinging had settled

in his chest, but he paid it no mind. Finally, the voices were far away enough for him to take a moment's rest. God, "a break" just wasn't part of their vocabularies, was it? He'd hoped if he took for the caves, so deep down with barely any light, his pursuers wouldn't follow (getting an arrow in your eye was almost a given here), but yeah, he should have known better by now. They sure knew how to stick like wet leaves. Sometimes it was amusing. Sometimes plain tiring.

Hiding wounds took energy, dammit.

A splash sounded too close and Dream snapped up, already reaching for his axe. Frozen, he listened more carefully. Yeah, there were definitely footsteps coming towards his little cavern, and he inwardly swore. Only one pair, though. Did they trail after him this far down? What, were they suicidal or something?

The rattling of bones bounced off the walls in the splash's direction, and a curse followed. An arrow wooshed, one hit, two, and the skeleton toppled. The footsteps continued, but now Dream had a name. He'd recognize that voice in his sleep by this point.

Of course it was *George*. He couldn't imagine a scenario where the rest of his team would let him go after Dream by himself, so he probably was being an idiot. Again. No matter how many times Dream would topple him and prove he stood no chance against him alone, George pretended he was both blind and deaf. (Definitely not mute, though.)

An endearing little cricket, he was. An annoying one, too. Dream *really* was not in the mood for another fight where he had to make sure George didn't, in fact, fall onto his blade by accident. At times, George made everything more difficult than it had to be.

And so, he let go of his axe. Instead, he turned around and retreated farther down the tunnel until he reached a narrow ravine. A quick scan later, and Dream found himself a spot higher up the walls, easily missable and perfect for his situation. In these times, he thanked the heavens for night vision potions. They might cost a pretty penny, but damn have they saved his life time and time again.

Without much effort, Dream scaled the rock and slipped inside the small opening. He made sure to move back enough to be out of seeing range for anyone below, but so he could still observe. He waited, and soon enough George emerged from the same cave, illuminated by the flame of his torch. Dream used to regard their usage of fire instead of potions as stupid, but once Sapnap drenched him in oil and chucked the burning stick at his face, so. They sure had creativity, Dream could give them that.

George paused in the clearing, sword ready, and surveyed the area. He was muttering something, but Dream couldn't make out the words. From the way his shoulders were rising, he was somewhat out of breath himself. Dream hoped he didn't decide to rest here. As good of a hiding spot as his was, his back was already complaining. *Move along, Georgie. Bye, bye.*

Something else caught George's attention, though. He cocked his head away from the wall and approached the ledge, extending his torch above the ravine to get a better look. Dream followed his line of sight, and *huh*. There, on the other side, nestled among the rock, were wooden platforms extending farther into a dark tunnel. An abandoned mineshaft, here? Those things sure were unpredictable. Why was George staring at it so much, though? He can't seriously be considering to —

George sheathed his sword, took a few steps back, and, with a running start, jumped over the ravine. He landed on the other side with a slight wobble but otherwise alright. Dream sighed. Only this idiot would think exploring a mineshaft alone was a good idea. Maybe George wasn't

suffering from a severe case of stubbornness. Maybe he just had no sense of self-preservation.

Dream would be a hypocrite if he judged him, though.

Still. At least Dream was certain in his own abilities to know he'd survive a trek into those cursed tunnels. Maybe George was, too, but overconfident people tended to be biased.

(That sounded odd, but Dream only blinked and ignored it.)

Now that George found a distraction, Dream could get out of here without any issue. He crawled out of the wall and climbed it down. He couldn't see George anymore, but he was igniting the dead lanterns on his way, a trail for him to follow back. In those godforsaken mazes, leaving no breadcrumbs was a sure death sentence, so at least George had *some* forethought.

Dream stood by the edge, looking at the flickering lights on the opposite side. On the other hand, mineshafts usually had an exit towards the surface somewhere. If Dream went back the way he came, he'd risk running into Sapnap and Bad, which wouldn't be ideal. He'd take a one on one over two anytime. And if that one happened to be George, well, not his fault the stars aligned like that.

And if he so happened to be in the right place to prevent an arrow from taking out someone's eye, or something, well. Who was he to oppose the universe?

Where would he get his daily amusement from if George went and got himself killed?

With a quiet jump, Dream crossed the ravine. He took out his axe, just in case, and entered the mineshaft. The wooden boards were old and creaked beneath his feet, but he paid it no mind. The whole damn thing was crawling with creatures of the dark, so it was never silent to begin with. Maybe that'd put George further on edge, too. Good, he could do with being on guard more.

Dream followed the lanterns at a quickened pace until he caught the sound of George's steps up ahead, somewhere to the left. He slowed and approached the corner with caution, trying to make as little noise as possible. So far, neither of them had encountered any mobs, though Dream *had* seen some suspicious red eyes down one of the corridors. Best not to linger too long here.

He peeked over the wall. It was a bigger area, a storage room of sorts. George had stopped and was wiping cobwebs away from one of the rusted chests. He placed his torch into a nearby holder and went to try opening the lid. It didn't budge. Frowning, he rummaged through his pockets and retrieved a piece of metal wire. Oh, now this was interesting. George crouched and began picking at the lock, murmuring under his breath. Eventually, a click sounded, and George smiled to himself.

Alright, that was pretty cool. If something didn't open, Dream would just hack at it with his axe until it did. He had the patience and precision for fighting, not *lock-picking*. Dream had assumed his hunters were the same.

Apparently not. Huh.

George started going through the loot, taking out whatever of value he could find. Some string, matches, pieces of coal, nothing spectacular. One by one, he repeated the process for each chest. *Diligent much?* Eventually, he closed the last one, and paused. Dream leaned out a bit more to see what had gotten his attention now, but instead, George snapped his head in his direction. Only due to his heightened response time did Dream manage to get out of his sight at the same moment.

Heart in his throat, Dream waited. Did George see him? In hindsight, his behavior was pretty

suspicious. Who just watched another doing nothing? Was this stalking? No, maybe he was waiting for an opportunity to attack. Yeah, that was what he'd say. Wait, hold on, what? *Say*? He didn't need to *say* anything, they never talked, and it wasn't like George would question it in the first place.

He was worrying about the wrong things. Again.

No sound came, though. Perhaps George hadn't seen him. Careful, Dream shifted to peek over again. George was still by the chests, his focus on some sort of... flower growing through the wooden boards along the wall. It was small and had a soft blue glow to it, a cold one. Dream couldn't remember seeing one like that before. Not that he paid much attention to flowers anyway. Did those even grow so far down? Didn't it need stuff like the sun or something?

George got up and went over to pluck it, gentle. He retrieved a notebook from a pouch and placed the flower amongst the pages before putting it away.

Did *George* like flowers? That'd be a bit unexpected. Didn't they, like, not have time for such things?

(Dream decided not to pursue that train of thought.)

George gathered his things and started heading back the way he came from. Dream scrambled out of the corridor into a nearby one, unlit, and waited until George passed him. No, he definitely hadn't noticed him. Good, that was good. Maybe he'd leave the mineshaft now and regroup with his teammates. That'd be great. These mazes crept Dream the hell out.

At one of the tunnels, George stopped. He stared into the darkness of it, chewing on his lip. He looked... hesitant, expression alternating between a frowning and a thoughtful one. What did he have to think about in a place like this? Finally, it settled into a determined one, and George went off the path. Dream almost groaned. *Please just leave it, George, please just leave.*

Quiet, Dream followed. The tunnel George ventured into was different from the rest—the type where the wooden platform acted as a bridge above a cavern below. Dream cast a glance down, and *oh*, there were those red eyes again. A chill travelled down his spine, and he lingered behind a stack of crates, watching as George went farther in, slow. Sure, these sort of corridors usually led to more valuable loot, but this was just reckless. George was being *stupid*, what was the point of this? Didn't he realize how—

A low growl broke the unnerving silence, and Dream snapped his eyes up. He hadn't noticed the broken second floor hidden in the shadows above them, but that didn't mean other things hadn't noticed *them*. Before either could react, a gnarly zombie fell through the wooden gap in front of George, landing on its feet and making a grab for the human. George swerved out of the way, already reaching for his sheathed weapon, but the monster was relentless. Without giving George a moment, it charged at him with a roar, teeth bared and ready to bite. George ducked and scrambled back. There wasn't much space to scramble back on, though, and the floorboards were loose and out of place. George's foot caught on one of them, and, with a gasp, he lost his footing, falling off the platform—

—through a nest of cobwebs below.

Before the zombie could jump after him, an arrow pierced its throat. Dream, sprinting towards it, cursed—too low. Still, it did the job—the monster snapped its attention away from George. Gurgling, it turned to pounce at Dream, but with a swing of his axe, Dream smashed through its head. The vile black liquid splashed across Dream's front, and the putrid smell of rotting flesh

invaded his senses. The corpse fell onto the bridge with a thud, unmoving. God, these bastards could be so annoying at times—

A choked scream sounded from below, cutting off Dream's thoughts. He hurried to the ledge, and there, in the darkness, at least half a dozen spiders were swarming a knocked down George. He was trying to kick and push them off, but they were so big and there were so many of them. Hisses echoed through the cavern as more of those ghastly creatures crawled out of various crevices, no doubt sensing a prey for their fangs. Yeah, there was no way Dream would let them have him.

Dream jumped into the ruined cobwebs onto one of the spiders, crushing it, and proceeded to tear as many of them off of George as he could. Finally, George was free enough to scurry away, gasping and heaving. Dream leapt over the scampering bodies, quickly grabbing the discarded but still burning torch, and pulled him to his feet.

"We gotta leave, *now*," Dream rushed out, already taking for the dark tunnels without letting go of George's arm. There was no time for any debating or questions or anything—once those cursed spiders had a taste, they'd never leave it, and even Dream couldn't take on an army.

Fortunately, besides the strained breathing, George stayed quiet and followed, albeit unsteadily. They'd left the mineshaft by that point, back into the winding caves. The horde of crawlers were on their tail, and Dream tried to lose them by making sharp turns, going farther and farther out. And if he were alone, maybe he could have just outrun the spiders, he'd done that many times in the past, but with how much George was struggling to keep up, chokes of pain intertwining with the hissing behind them, that wasn't an option.

There had to be *something* Dream could do, some way to outmaneuver them, some way to chase them off—

The fire flickered as they ran, not out yet.

Dream pulled George roughly forward, out of the way, as he himself stopped and twisted around. He ghosted over the few bottles hanging on his belt until he found the right one. It had been more of a joke than anything, having it with him, but if asked, he'd say it was calculated. All according to plan.

He unhooked the glass and, putting as much force into it as he could, chucked it at the pathway behind them, in front of the approaching spiders. The bottle shattered and the oil splashed across the floor. Dream wasted no time in throwing the torch at it, jumping back.

Flames roared to life, engulfing the cavern in bright light. High-pitched screeches echoed as the fire licked the first line of spiders, and none dared to cross it. That'd hold them off for a bit, but they weren't out of danger yet. Dream turned to George, who was leaning against the wall, eyes shut, heaving. He was clenching his head as a pained expression twisted his face, choking on agonized gasps. A spark of uneasiness crept up Dream's spine, but he ignored it. There was no *time*.

"C'mon, c'mon, let's go." Dream grabbed George's arm and pulled him along as he ran away from the fire, farther into the darkness.

He had to find a place to hide, fast. The effects of the dark vision potion were beginning to wear off, and becoming blind in this situation was far from ideal. A light source, he needed a light source, but he had no matches or anything with him, perhaps George would? But he couldn't just ask, he was pretty sure that'd be inappropriate. Then again, Dream *was* trying to save George's life here, so maybe?

A low shine up ahead seized Dream's thoughts. There was only one thing that produced natural light in caves, and huh, were they that low? An opening in the rock, big enough for a person to fit through, was illuminated by a soft yellow glow, and the popping of lava sounded from within. Dream slowed, and, after a moment's consideration, pushed George through the crevice before following himself.

The cavern was spacious and intricate—ceiling high, a large tunnel in the back, bodies of lava sprinkled around. A good place to rest, if Dream could block off the gap. A quick scan around the area revealed various pieces of rubble, a particularly big one farther along the wall. Yeah, that'd work, so he got to pushing the rock. Its jagged surface dug into his shoulder, a dull pain igniting, but Dream paid it no mind. The thing was heavy and kept getting stuck on the uneven floor, but eventually, he managed to get it in front of the crevice. He'd like to see those crawling bastards try to get to them now.

*Finally*, Dream could lean against the rock and try to catch his breath. The adrenaline coursing through his system did wonders for his endurance, but now that the danger passed, his heart was beginning to calm, and with it, the excitement that was keeping him up. He'd spent the entire day running away from the hunters, fending off mobs left and right, and now this incident. Others might believe his energy reserves were never-ending, but they believed many things. Dream would have been dead long ago if they didn't.

Still, at the end of the day, he was human, and damn was he exhausted. A mild shake had settled in his bones, and he desperately needed to relax for a minute.

He wasn't alone, however, and, with a groan, Dream ran a hand down his mask.

"God, George, what the hell were you *thinking*? Who in their right mind goes to a mineshaft alone?" he complained, throwing his arm out for emphasis. "Honestly, you are *so* lucky I was in a good mood."

That last part wasn't necessarily true, but to anyone else, it was.

When he got no response, Dream lifted his head and turned away from the wall, casting a look around the place.

George was nowhere to be seen.

Did he seriously run off?

"Oh c'mon," Dream huffed as he pushed himself from the rock. "I'm not gonna fight you, George, that'd kinda negate the whole rescuing part, y'know."

Still, there was no answer, and Dream began making his way across the cavern, glancing around. Nothing besides his footsteps and the cracking of lava could be heard, and, behind his mask, Dream frowned. How had George managed to get away without him noticing? Why had he run anyway? Okay, maybe that wasn't surprising, they weren't exactly on friendly terms, but a "thank you" before he did would have been nice. No manners left in this world.

Dream could have let him go and be on his merry way. He could have, but he couldn't get the image of George trembling and heaving with that expression out of his head. It was a bit... concerning, really. Dream had had no time to assess the damage he got dealt, but George *had* gotten swarmed by a pack of poisonous spiders minutes before. It'd be annoying if he went and died anyway after everything.

“Where did you go?..” Dream murmured, tracing and walking around a couple of large stalagmites. The cave had many of those, and with each second, his uneasiness grew. George couldn’t have gotten far, not with how unsteady he looked, so where—

As Dream turned a corner, alarms flared, but it wasn’t quick enough. Something hard connected with the side of his head, and he stumbled back with a pained gasp. Black dots swirled in his vision, skewing everything, but he could still make out the attacker in front of him. Dazed, he didn’t have a chance to move out of the way before a blade plunged at him. On instinct, he grabbed the hands holding the knife before it could make contact, but the force of impact coupled with his swaying sight was enough to topple both of them to the ground.

With George straddling him, his nerves spiked as he realized the blade was inches away from piercing through his throat. With how much strength George was putting into his attack, he was dead set on making sure it did.

He had *not* anticipated this.

*fuck oh fuck goddammit*

“George, *stop*,” he spoke through clenched teeth, trying to push the knife away. The sharp pain in his head was draining his energy. “I don’t wanna fight you, you idiot!..”

But George didn’t respond. His breathing was quick and uneven, and his whole frame shook from head to toe. The light from the lava illuminated the paleness of his skin, much whiter than usual, sickly. He stared at Dream with a strange intensity, as if a mist was covering his wide eyes, a crazed spark in them that definitely hadn’t been there before.

Only then did Dream notice the many bite marks littered across his body.

Right, the fucking *poisonous spiders*.

No way was he getting killed in such a *stupid* situation.

Bristling, he delivered a kick to George’s stomach with his knee. George choked out a cry of pain, and at the moment when his grip weakened, Dream pushed against him and threw him to the side, snatching the knife away. By the time he sat up, the black swirls and the pounding making him hiss, George had managed to scramble away backwards until he hit the wall. His gaze didn’t leave Dream’s form for a second.

Holding his head where hot liquid trailed down his face, Dream tried blinking away the spots so he could properly focus on George. At least it didn’t look like he’d attack again, not with how he was pressing against the rock, terror twisting his pale face. Dream couldn’t... He couldn’t say he’d ever seen George this purely scared. Sure, he’d get frightened, especially when Dream would get too close for comfort, but even then, determination would mix in with the fear, and he’d always charge back, never cower. Even moments before, wasn’t that why he attacked?

Dream had no idea how he was supposed to deal with this sort of *child-like* fright.

“I’m not gonna hurt you, George, alright?” Dream said, still trying to catch his breath as he moved into a kneeling position. To highlight his point, he skidded the knife across the floor away from both of them. “Well, if you don’t do anything stupid again.”

George was borderline hyperventilating by now, and that wasn’t a good sign. This much adrenaline mixing up with the spiders’ venom was a recipe for disaster, it had to be. The pain made it difficult to focus, but Dream was sure he knew how this whole thing worked, something about



anxiety and struggling and—

—and how too much poison reacting with too much stress would make the heart stop.

And George was *hyperventilating*.

Fuck, Dream needed to calm him down. Fuck. *Fuck*.

That was, quite literally, the opposite of his speciality.

Before Dream could say anything, though, George finally broke the silence.

“What... what the *hell* are you?” he gasped out.

If the assault before surprised Dream, this question knocked the air out of him.

“George, c’mon... You know who I am,” he spoke, forcing a light chuckle into his voice.

He hadn’t asked *who*, though. He’d asked *what*.

Somehow an even worse question.

“”George”?..”

There was no way he’d forgotten his own name. There was *no way*.

In any other situation, Dream would have rolled his eyes and called the bluff, an idiotic one at that. But George looked the furthest from joking a person could be. Delusions from spider venom weren’t unheard of, but they were such a rare side-effect that Dream hadn’t even considered the possibility. Just his fucking luck.

“Yeah, that’s—that’s your name,” Dream said, quieter. He moved forwards a bit, still on the ground. “And you, um, you need to calm down, alright?”

“Stay back,” George hissed as a particularly violent tremble shook his body. “What—What kind of — *creature* —are you?”

*What in the everloving hell was that supposed to mean?*

“I’m—George, I’m not a monster,” Dream laughed in surprise, though a coldness had settled. “I’m a human.”

“No, you’re not,” George shuddered and he bit into his lip so hard it drew blood. “You don’t—have a fucking *face*. ”

Dream stilled. Did George... not realize he was wearing a mask? How much out of it did he have to be?

“I do, I promise I do, you’re just—you’re not seeing things right,” Dream explained, trying to keep his voice level. “Your mind’s messed up, do you understand?”

He shook his head with a choked cry, “No, no, you’re—you’re going to kill me, *you’re going to kill me—* ”

“George!” Dream exclaimed over him, pulling down his hood. “Look at me!”

George quieted with a whimper, staring at him with those wide eyes. Dream's nerves froze—why had he done that? What had he planned on doing next? This was—This wasn't—Why was he—

But George was panicking, and Dream was a *creature*. He wouldn't let himself be calmed down like this. His anxiety would grow until his body couldn't take it anymore. And why? Because Dream knew only how to hunt, hurt, kill?

That was all so easy. So straightforward. Simple to master. Simple to understand.

It shouldn't have made a difference. Whether George was bleeding out from Dream's axe or whether his heart was failing because of Dream's presence shouldn't have made a difference. Both unfortunate, both not preferable, but the first would have been self-defense, so it wouldn't have mattered, in the end. George would have been just another fool, in the end.

This wasn't self-defense. If Dream did nothing purely because of his *principles*, this would be cruel.

"Look at me, George," he repeated, softer this time.

He lifted his hand to his mask. God, it was heavy. As if made out of lead. His whole body felt made out of lead. Every nerve was screaming at him to put it away, to find another option, he didn't need to do this, he *couldn't* do this, but he forced his trembling fingers to grip the hard edge.

It would be okay, he would be okay, there was no reason to fret. So what if he hadn't shown his face to another in years? That was tactical, purely tactical, tactical, *tactical*, and nothing else. George was delusional, anyway—he wouldn't know who he was looking at. He probably wouldn't remember, either. It didn't matter. *It didn't matter.*

Just for a couple of minutes. It would be okay.

With a shaky breath, he pulled the mask over his head and lowered it.

"See?" He twisted his lips into an unsteady smile. "I'm the same as you. No reason to be afraid."

George had stilled, and his eyes were boring holes into Dream's. He tried not to flinch at the intensity. He tried not to flinch at the way the cave's cool air was tickling his now-exposed skin. Exposed, for the world to see, because here, at this moment, this damp cavern and this one hyperventilating boy could have been the entire world as far as Dream was concerned.

He forced his erratic heart to settle. *He was fine.*

"George, you—" He licked his dry lips. How were you supposed to calm someone? "You need to breathe, alright? You're gonna pass out if you keep choking," he finished with an awkward grin.

"I—I don't—" George shook his head. "*I can't—*"

"H-Hey, how about you, uh, breathe with me?" Dream suggested. His mind was frying, and the dots in his vision weren't only from the hit anymore. "Yeah? Just—Just follow my lead."

He inhaled, slow, and exhaled. In and out. In and out. Cool and collected, nice and even. He wasn't sure if George would listen, but after a few beats, it looked like he was trying to. Dream's own heart was quieting with each deep breath, and huh, he hadn't thought it'd actually be effective. *In and out. In and out.*

"You're getting it, you're doing good," Dream praised as George's heaves were slowing. "I'm

gonna—I'll get over to you, okay? Just keep—yeah.”

Dream rose to his feet, making sure to not make any fast movements, and started approaching him. He'd stop whenever George's breathing would hitch, and continue when it'd settle down, all the while giving him an example to match. Eventually, he was in front of him, and he crouched down, careful to observe his reactions. While it was still far from steady and calm, George wasn't on the verge of suffocating anymore, and his dazed eyes, still trained on Dream's face, were no longer as wide.

Alright, well, this was progress, and he'd take any.

God, this was so weird. Dream was completely out of his element here. When the only human interactions in your life were with merchants and people trying to murder you, that didn't do wonders for your, well... this. Whatever this was. A strange sensation had nestled somewhere in his chest, uncomfortable, and he wanted it gone. It crawled up his throat and dug in, more biting by the moment. Clawing at it wouldn't help, he knew that, and yet still keeping his hands at bay was difficult.

He was fine, this was fine, it wouldn't take long, it was all *fine*—

“Do you have any regen or health potions?” Dream blurted out. He needed to distract himself. And he was pretty sure this much venom could still be fatal even without the cardiac arrest part.

“Um, I—don't know,” George mumbled, shutting his eyes as a flash of pain crossed his expression.

Dream did a quick scan, and yeah, that had been a stupid question. He didn't. And Dream had used up all of his. No antidote either.

“We're gonna have to get you out of here,” Dream said, positioning his mask on the side of his head. Simply having it closer helped. “I'll need one of your torches for that.”

George didn't protest as Dream retrieved the wooden stick and a match to light it from his person. In fact, he wasn't reacting much to anything. His eyes hadn't opened and his shoulders were drooping, head unsteady. *No, wait, hold on—*

“Hey!” Dream gave him a slight slap, startling him. “Don't fall asleep.”

George hummed in a non-committal way, though tried to not close his eyes again, not really looking at anything. The poison was far from done attacking him, and if he lost consciousness now, regaining it would be difficult. If not impossible.

“C'mon, let's get you up,” Dream said as he hooked George's arm over his neck and wrapped his own around George's side, pulling him to his feet. Having two free hands to hold him up would make this much easier, but he doubted George would be able to carry the torch himself.

Once up, he repositioned his arm into a more secure grip, and rattled George a bit. “We're gonna start walking now, alright? Lean onto me if you need to.”

Besides a murmur, George didn't answer, but listened.

Their pace was painstakingly slow, what with George struggling to make his legs work. Still, he was trying to, and Dream took comfort in that. The exertion from borderline-carrying him was taking a toll on Dream, though, and the pain in his head had settled into a steady pounding. It'd be amazing if he got a concussion on top of everything.

If both of them made it out of these caverns alive, he'd go to the nearest town and rent out the most expensive room with the softest bed. Screw saving money, he'd deserve a goddamn reward for this bullshit.

When George's feet began dragging more, Dream shook him.

"Don't sleep," he warned.

"Can't," he grumbled in response.

Dream cast him a look. He had his eyes half-open, and they kept fluttering shut. His breaths were quieting, too.

"Talk to me, George, don't sleep," Dream commanded, and suppressed a flinch at how a tinge of desperation leaked through. He hadn't intended for that.

"Bout what?"

Well, shit, Dream didn't know. He hadn't exactly had many casual conversations in his life.

"Um," he said smartly. "What's your favorite color?"

He wanted to hit himself. What kind of stupid question was that? Were they, what, children? No one had favorite colors at this age, *for god's sake*.

George hummed, swaying his head from side to side. "...Blue."

Okay, well, his stupid question got an answer, so there was that.

"Blue? That's kinda basic," Dream huffed out a laugh. He didn't know if it was basic. He didn't have a favorite color at this age. It felt basic.

"I guess," he whispered, shutting his eyes.

Dream exhaled a shuddering breath. It was rather cold in this tunnel they were taking. At least it was going upwards.

He shook George again. "Why blue?"

It was another stupid question. But there was no one around to judge him, at least.

George sighed, and looked somewhere off to the side, before settling back onto the ground. "I... can see it."

So he was still delirious. That response made no sense.

A response was a response, though.

"Do you, uh, like sky blue, or—I dunno, ocean?"

Dream wasn't sure why he was so caught up on the whole color thing, but if he let it go, he'd have to come up with another conversation topic. And if his first was anything to go by, it wouldn't be anything substantial either.

And if the whole color thing got George to talk, well. It'd do.

The caves were cold, but the body against him was warm, and the contrast made his heart beat weird. Having a person this close without either trying to maim the other was... unusual. To put it mildly. He wasn't equipped with dealing with non-life-threatening closeness. His hold around George's waist was awkward, it didn't fit, their whole position was wholly out of place. God, couldn't have George gotten himself attacked by a pack of *normal* spiders? Dream would have known how to handle that. He would have mocked George for his recklessness and needing to be saved by *Dream*. Oh, that would have been fun.

This? Dream wasn't sure what the hell *this* was.

Their trek through the caverns was a slow and exhausting one. He had to pull up George onto various cliffs, push through narrow passageways, stop him from tripping on various rocks, and avoid mobs at all costs. All the while keeping George awake and himself up. This cave system was a big one—anyone could get lost in a heartbeat. Dream wanted to believe he was going the right way. Since they couldn't take the route they had before (surviving those spiders again would be pushing their luck a bit too much), Dream had to hope the tunnels would connect. Dream had to hope for a lot of things.

Eventually, though, they got into an area Dream could vaguely recognize. That was a good sign, and from there he could try retracing his steps. George was barely responding by that point. If his friends weren't anywhere close, this would soon turn sour.

"We're almost there," he murmured into the air. Not sure whether for George or himself.

As they traversed farther through the tunnels that were now familiar, Dream picked up a sound up ahead. Muffled and unclear, but it was *voices*. Never before had Dream been so relieved to hear other people. That usually meant danger, but now?

*Fucking finally.*

When they were close enough, right around the corner, Dream could tell they weren't having a pleasant conversation. Worry laced their words, as it was expected, and Dream halted before they got too near. It'd be a bit of a disaster if the two others saw them like this—they would probably assume something much different from what had actually happened. Dream would too, after all.

"George, hey, look up," he whispered, shaking George. "Do you see that light up there?"

George lifted his head, slowly, and hummed.

"You need to get over there. Think you can do that?"

George sighed and murmured something. Sounded like disagreement.

Dream tested the waters by shifting George's weight onto his own feet. They immediately buckled, and Dream pulled him back up again before he hit the ground. Yeah, no, he couldn't as much as stand, much less walk.

"Alright, plan B," he mumbled.

He lowered George to the floor and leaned him against the wall. If he couldn't get George to his friends, he'd need to bring his friends *to* George.

Now, to attract their attention.

Dream stepped back and threw the torch next to George. The already dying flame went out, but,

hopefully, the sound of wood hitting rock echoed enough. Quickly and quietly, he retreated out of the passageway into the darkness where he crouched behind a larger boulder and watched. Soon, the voices and the lights grew, and he heard how the pair ran over, exclaiming. They got into his line of sight as they dropped down next to the barely conscious George. Bad examined his wounds as Sapnap began rummaging through his backpack, both exchanging instructions and questions.

Dream exhaled a deep breath, closing his eyes for a moment and letting his shoulders slump.

This had been much more than he had bargained for, but it was okay. George wouldn't remember, Dream would forget, and the next time they'd meet, it'd be as if nothing had happened, and Dream would know normalcy again.

He moved farther back into the shadows, away from the trio.

Yeah, this was fine.

## Chapter End Notes

owo i hope u enjoyed reading this :] It'd be super appreciated if you told me what you thought in the comments!! I always respond and I love reading your reactions ♥  
(just to clarify, yes, George doesn't, in fact, remember the majority of the events)

Also omg [technoblade on tumblr](#) drew a lil something something so y'all better check it out like right now go go go, i cannot describe how much i appreciate stuff like this, my heart is m e l t i n g

Speaking of tumblr, [I have one too](#) under the same name :] I would absolutely love to chat, I'm always down to talk, and I'd really like to get to know y'all :]] I may also post stuff, like, sneak peeks and such 🏠🏠🏠 just fyi 🏠🏠🏠

Thank u sm for reading <3 I can't say how often I'll update, but it will probably be on Sundays, so :]

## Chapter 3

### Chapter Notes

Happy New Year!!!!:D

I have returned with yet another instalment for this EPIC and THRILLING story. SO UNEXPECTED!!! So be sure to SUBSCRIBE if you don't want to miss when I add yet another instalment for this totally EPIC and THRILLING story

But seriously, thank you all so much again for all your support ♥♥ Your comments literally make my day and FUEL me. I love you all sm ♥♥

Hope u enjoy, i died writing this ye

also, sorry if you got two notifs for this, i had some issues oops

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Oh wait, hold on, this could work.”

George cast Bad a glance from where he was sorting out string on the other side of their little hole in the wall. They were spending the night there, and Bad was in the middle of his daily scouring session. Sometimes, George felt bad for leaving all the work to him. Then he'd remember he tried once and led them in the opposite direction. That made him stop feeling as bad.

“Found something?” Sapnap asked between bites of steak. It hadn't been long since they'd eaten but this was what Sapnap liked to refer to as “midnight snacking”. Even though the sun had barely set yet.

“Not found, just noticed,” Bad said whilst tapping the laid out map. His lips had stretched into an excited albeit tentative smile, and he beckoned to Sapnap. George stayed by his strings, idly listening. “Look at this. If we keep going in the same direction, we'll soon reach Taswell.”

“Oh shit, we're that close?” Sapnap marveled as he wiped off his hands on his shirt and scooched over to Bad.

“Language! But yes. It's likely he plans to travel along the border here—” Bad trailed on the paper. “—and cross into the Wailing Swamps. That's the most logical pathing.”

“Ugh, it'll be impossible to track him there,” Sapnap groaned, throwing his head back. “Bad, *please* tell me the good news now.”

Swamps were, indeed, known to be one of the shittiest biomes for finding people. And this one was notorious for swallowing up travelers without a trace. George suppressed a frown. They couldn't afford to lose Dream this fast, especially after the bastard himself threw them a bone. That'd be laughable, and George refused to give him any more reason to laugh.

He'd already given him *plenty*, and the mere thought made him bristle.

“The good news is that we know how he'll get there,” Bad beamed. “See this river here? To get to

the swamps, he'd have to cross it somewhere, it's far too dangerous to swim through. We can rule out the entire Taswell area, which leaves us—" He tapped on a few places. "—these bridges here. However!" he continued before Sapnap had a chance to intervene. He liked to do that. "We could catch up to him if he were to take any of these—they're more convenient for us than him—so the only one that he'd *certainly* cross before us is this one. And I'm betting my money he won't be taking any chances."

Bad was smiling, and Sapnap scrunched up his face at him.

"Alright, I'll bite, how's that good for us?"

"We're getting there before him."

"Isn't... the whole point that we can't?"

"Normally, we wouldn't, but," Bad rummaged through his bag and took out another map, a darker one, and spread it over the first one. "Taswell has a Nether travel system."

George paused his string sorting, perking up. He'd never used one of those before, given how expensive and rare they were, so the prospect of finally experiencing one was enticing. Still, though, it made him curious. Bad sure was adamant about this. They'd have to spend almost all their remaining savings on getting there, which was a risky move in and of itself. Not to mention the issue with *Taswell*.

Dream would avoid it for a reason, after all.

"Uh, you want *us* to go to Taswell?" Sapnap voiced George's thoughts, eyebrows risen. "Not to question your planning skills or anything, but how are we supposed to go against Dream without *weapons*?"

"They don't prohibit *all* weaponry," Bad responded, a bit meek. "Bows and blunt knives are okay."

"Oh yeah, the butter knives will for sure make him quake in his boots."

George couldn't push down a snort. "Who knows, maybe cutlery is the way to go. Imagine terrorizing him with forks. That'd for sure break a man."

"Perhaps," Bad giggled before sobering up. "But I was thinking... We don't necessarily need to fight him."

"What, you want to set up a trap or something?" Sapnap asked, dubious.

"Well, not *exactly*," Bad spoke as he began going through a pouch. "I think we should take the chance to finally plant this."

He took out a small, less than an inch wide black disc, and held it up carefully between his fingers.

George's heart thudded quicker.

"Oh!" Sapnap brightened, an excited grin on his face. "Are we gonna finally initiate Mission: Fuck You, Dream?"

"Language, Sapnap."

"Mission: Screw you, Dream?"



Bad sighed, shaking his head. He ignored Sapnap and continued, "Since the compass finished calibrating," *which took way too long and we were totally scammed* was left unsaid, "we should really try to get this on him before he gets to the swamps. This might be our only opportunity to do so."

Even if that meant spending the remainder of their coin in the attempt.

Honestly, the other annoying thing about hunting down Dream was how expensive it could get. All of their previous jobs wouldn't usually take more than a few weeks, so besides necessities, such as repairs and the occasional potion, they wouldn't need much money. Which was good, considering their contractors never gave them any in advance. Dream's was no different. In George's humble opinion, that was utter bullshit. For some reason, they believed hunters could live off of air or something. "*Not my problem,*" they'd say. "*No upfront payment.*"

That was how this whole business operated. Maybe it was scummy, but they couldn't do much about it.

It was a few months ago when Bad proposed they acquired a tracking compass.

Now, that stuff was ridiculously pricey. Not to mention practically non-existent. Something about legality? It took them going down many shady alleys, meeting many shady folk, and getting nearly stabbed several times because they had the wrong accent to finally get themselves one of those compasses. A broken one, though, mind you. Instead of looking for a working one, Bad proposed they tried getting it fixed instead. *That* was a whole other pain. The enchanter they tracked down that could get it up and running again charged them an outrageous amount, but they didn't have any other choice. By the end of it, they were left with barely any change, but they had been getting desperate.

It wouldn't do them any good if they couldn't set it up, though.

George refused to lose Dream and let him make a mockery out of them (*him*) again.

Even if he had to shove the tracker down his damn throat.

He'd like to shove something very sharp down his throat, too.

That was an unusually hostile thought, and George had to take a moment to still himself, closing his eyes and taking a breath. Getting aggravated would only make him careless, and that would only lead to mistakes.

No doubt that was what Dream was hoping for. Carelessness induced by spite or *something* else.

George would not give him the satisfaction, that much he was certain of.

If Dream believed something so stupid would have an effect on him, he was *way* in over his head.

So instead of entertaining these thoughts further, George stood up and walked over to where Bad and Sapnap were discussing potential strategies. He sat in front and examined the map too, thinking.

So, if they travelled through Taswell, they would have to give away their main weapons for holding (politics or something; George never paid close attention to those). There were no towns close to the bridge that weren't in Taswell, so they couldn't buy new ones after exiting either (not that they'd even have the funds for that after the Nether). Meaning, a fight was out of the question. Traps? It'd have to be one that'd hold him long enough to plant the thing, which would... look

suspicious as hell.

There had to be something. He'd met Dream a week ago, and while he'd rather not think about it any more than he had to, surely he could use some information from that?

...He wondered.

"Hey, Bad?" George spoke, interrupting the discussion whether bear traps were a genius or an absolutely idiotic idea. "Can you show me the path he's been taking from the town we were at?"

"Oh, sure," Bad shifted closer and, after locating the starting point, trailed up the map recalling each spot they'd found Dream's presence at. "Pretty sure he should be around here now." He circled a small area. "Unless he travelled through the night."

George hummed, inspecting the trail. It all winded through forests and plains and general wilderness. Asides from the village they'd met, there were no others on or close to Dream's pathing.

He hadn't had a shield with him that last time.

And given the lack of places to acquire a new one, he probably was still without it. A small detail, really, but George latched onto it.

A shieldless Dream was a more cautious Dream.

He could use that.

"I think I've got an idea."

~

Taswell's walls were huge.

How could one country afford to enclose their entire land was beyond George. Well, maybe they didn't, but from the entry point they'd reached, the black bricks stretched in both directions into the horizon. He'd known Taswell was obsessed with security, but this seemed like a bit of an overkill.

The guards by the gate were cheerful, contrasting with the mood George had been getting thus far. When he'd first saw the walls, he worried whether they'd even be let inside, but that wasn't an issue. Apparently, Taswell was a hot tourist destination or something. Their new Nether system also attracted a lot of attention. For most, passing in and out wasn't a problem. The problem arose for people like the three of them.

They were led into a storage room of sorts within the thick walls where they had to lay down all their inventory. Bad filed out a document, naming their weaponry before most of it was tagged with numbers and taken away. In return, they received a paper with details regarding the storing of their weapons.

"We shall be holding these items until your return or for two weeks," one of the guards informed them. "This paper is your proof of ownership."

Yeah, Taswell wasn't big on the whole fighting thing.

Thinking about it, it'd be rather funny if Dream would just... settle down here. Now *that* would be

a strategy. What would the hunters be able to do? Ask him to come with them very nicely? Get the local authorities involved and get dragged away themselves because *why the hell are you terrorizing this man?* Dream would love to see that, no doubt, from his little porch with a little cat and a little rocking chair.

He's too much of a blood-loving antsy bastard, though.

Even if he did try to hide in such a country, George would get to him one way or the other. He'd yank him out of it by his hair if he had to.

"Thank goodness they let us keep our bows," Bad sighed as they were making their way towards a city in the distance. "I was getting worried there for a second."

"Yeah, we'd have needed to resort to plan B," Sapnap said with a nod.

George lifted a brow at him. "Which is?"

Sapnap grinned, and he already disliked where this was going. "George in drag."

That earned him a hard shove.

"What, it'd work! Grade A distraction."

"You are so annoying."

"While I think it's good to consider options outside the box, maybe let's stick to what wouldn't leave George unarmed," Bad chipped in with a sheepish laugh.

"He wouldn't be unarmed, he could have, like, a few forks strapped to his thigh—"

"Oh my god, shut up," George groaned. "Why is this even a conversation, we have our bows."

"Look, all I'm saying is, it's a option we can have on the table," Sapnap said, lifting his hands up in defense, with a stupid smile on his face.

"Let's get back on track, you muffins," Bad chastised them before George could shoot back. "We should start asking for directions."

That was easier said than done, given the heavy accents the people of this place had. Still, after some confusing directions and going around in circles for a good hour, they got to their destination. A large glass dome at the edge of the city, surrounded by a few rounds of walls, heavily armed guards patrolling every inch. With how tight security was in this whole country, it was no surprise the Nether portals would be guarded with twice as much. Again, not that that was a problem for travel. It was, after all, less for the people and more for... whatever was on the other side.

At the entrance, there was a bit of a queue. Folk wishing to travel ranged from politicians to adventurers to tourists, all of them stacked. Only a few were being let in at a time, so it took awhile for their turn to come. Passage to their desired portal hurt their coin pouches dearly, and George cringed. They'd have to take on some odd jobs after this for sure.

As they were led through the dome, the instructor droned on about safety measures and rules they had to abide by, such as "*follow your guide, don't shout, stay on the designated paths*" and many more. Most of it was intuitive. Some not as much. "*Don't cat-call any piglins, they don't like it. Zombified ones don't mind it as much, but it's still not recommended*" in particular made George wonder *what the fuck* kind of circumstances had led to such a precaution. Or maybe it was better to

not know.

He also didn't want to know how many took the "*zombified ones don't mind it as much*" part and ran with it.

"Whoa, that's pretty," Bad marveled once the portal finally came into view and they walked the charred ground to it.

It wasn't anything impressive, really. Or, at least, not as impressive as George had thought it'd be. He'd expected bigger, for something that promised a whole other dimension, but instead they got something barely enough for two people. The pulsating blue *was* beautiful, though. It looked like it'd taste like blueberry jelly.

While the instructor was chatting up their guide by the portal as the woman checked her equipment, Sapnap was eyeing the thick frame. It was a shiny, jagged thing, with many bumps and protrusions, and once the two locked gazes, George's stare turned narrow. Sapnap grinned, his fingers twitching, and George shook his head in warning.

Sapnap had never been one to care, though, and he lifted his hand to touch the dark obsidian, gleeful. Upon contact, though, he yanked it back with a yelp.

"Shit, that's hot," he hissed, sucking on his burnt skin.

George rolled his eyes as Bad once again told him off for swearing. "You deserved that."

"I said not to touch anything," the instructor remarked, unamused.

"I thought you meant inside," Sapnap huffed. "How was I supposed to know it'd burn?"

"We are literally standing on scorched ground right now, Sapnap."

He didn't respond, just grumbled in displeasure.

Still, he cast the obsidian a longing gaze.

"Alright, ready to go?"

One rip through dimensions later, their group found themselves on the other side. Dry heat assaulted George's skin the moment they stepped out, and he couldn't stop himself from coughing at the dusty air. An acidic fog hung around them, digging into his eyes and skewing his vision. It didn't help that everything was so damn *bleak*, murky greys blurring together into a mesh of black.

He'd been excited at first, but all it took was a minute to hate it.

Low squealing and growling caught George's attention, and he snapped to the side to see their guide bringing in a couple of large hogs from a fenced area. They looked like they could rip you in half with one bite, and yet the woman was tugging on their leashes without any concern.

"This will be our ride to your destination," she drawled.

"Or our ride to death," George remarked, unsettled.

"Keep your hands away from their mouths and you'll be fine."

The group shared glances with each other. Sapnap shrugged.

Would they get a refund if any of them got mauled?

“No refunds, but you *would* need to pay a fine for upsetting the hoglins,” the woman answered George’s silent question, making him flinch. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it.

“Everyone asks that.”

It was a bit unnerving.

Bad got onto one of the hogs with the guide while Sapnap and George were left to share the second one. After a bit of squabbling and Bad reprimanding them, George conceded and let Sapnap have the first seat. He stuck his tongue out at George, earning an eye-roll in response.

Their water reserves dwindled quickly. George suspected it wasn’t only due to them always drinking; in this heat, no water could remain for long. Probably. Add that to why the Nether only *sounded* cool. While Bad chatted up the guide about this place, fascinated by the history and their treaties with the piglins, George was left with Sapnap. The only thing *they* shared between them were complaints.

The sights of huge lava pools, dark netherrack mountains and blue forests were neat, though. The black brick path they were following was one that winded through all of those, and George tried to distract himself from the scorching air by looking around. Once in awhile they’d spot a pack of piglins treading into caves, pickaxes swung over their shoulders, and they didn’t pay their group any mind. Some others pulled carts full of gold. Those were warier and would glare until they went out of sight.

“What *would* happen if I cat-called them?” Sapnap wondered, observing a few of them mining.

“Like, just whistle?”

“Probably the same as always,” George responded, dry. “They’d attempt to tear your eyes out.”

“Hey, that happened only *twice*—”

“Most people would get the hint after the first time.”

“At least I try,” Sapnap sniffled.

“Your tries put everyone around you in danger, somehow.”

“Alright, then how’d *you* do it, Georgie?” he asked, turning to look at him over his shoulder.

George frowned. “Do what?”

“Oh, you know what. ”

Sapnap was grinning now, and that usually didn’t lead anywhere good.

“I really do not.”

“Your face says otherwise.”

George huffed and gave Sapnap a shove, almost enough to topple him off the hoglin. “I *really* do not. You are delusional.”

“*I’m* delusional.”

“Yes.”

Sapnap laughed. “Alright, George. One day I’ll get your secret.”

He wouldn’t. *God*, George hoped he wouldn’t.

Not that it even was a secret, really. He simply preferred not to mention it. Nothing would change if he did, after all. Yeah, he’d acted like an idiot, yeah, he hadn’t been cautious enough, *yeah*, he probably shouldn’t have let Dream walk free, but he knew all that already. Them getting annoyed at him would just sour everyone’s moods and that’d be that.

He’d have to explain the spider incident, too. Which, frankly, he himself wasn’t too sure about either. A weak argument in his case at best.

And after the initial irritation settled, Sapnap would no doubt never let him live *whatever the hell happened* down. George did not need that sort of public embarrassment in his life. He was doing a great job at bashing himself without anyone’s help, *thank you*.

What mattered was that it wouldn’t happen again. Everything else was irrelevant.

(Maybe George was unwilling to face the consequences of his actions, but no one would be, honestly.)

After what felt like an eternity, the next portal station came into view, and the group sighed in relief. Even Sapnap had grown quiet at some point, as the heat became borderline unbearable. They were all overjoyed to finally scramble through the portal back to the overworld.

Never again would George take cool, fresh air for granted.

Alright, phase one, done.

Now onto the *actual* challenge.

~

Thankfully, there were plenty of trees around the bridge.

George sighed from the branch he was perched on, changing positions. The sun was nearing the horizon, and they were banking on the hope that Dream would want to pass into the swamps before nightfall. They had nothing to go off of besides Bad’s calculations, but in theory, he *should* be close.

He should have been close a few hours ago, too. George’s legs were killing him.

George cast a glance to the general direction where he knew Sapnap was. The lushness hid both of them well, but if he tried, he could spot some black and white. Their gazes met, and Sapnap grimaced. Bad, too, on the other side of the river was most likely not having the time of his life.

(Even if Dream did have a shield, which was what Bad and Sapnap believed, blocking from both ends would be tricky. Bad and Sapnap had some reservations, but since no one put up a better plan, they just had to hope luck would be on their side. And George had to hope he was right.)

Still, stakeouts were nothing new to them. Maybe not with Dream (the bastard wasn’t predictable enough), but usually, that was how a lot of hunts ended. Wait until the target reached the desired area, surprise attack them, and there you had it. Another paycheck, secured. A part of George

entertained the thought that maybe, they'd get lucky this time as well. Maybe they wouldn't need to go through the extra steps, maybe it would be enough for once.

But when was it ever enough with *Dream*?

Something in his throat stuttered, and George bit the sourness down. *Not now, dammit.*

Focus, focus, focus.

It'd be fine.

When George began considering calling it for the night—maybe Dream had decided to wait until the next day—a rustling intermixed with other forest sounds, a crack of a branch, and George tensed. He shifted positions to get a clearer look, wincing at how his knees complained. Soon enough, a figure emerged at the other side, strolling towards the bridge at a relaxed pace, hands in his pockets. The only missing thing was some humming. Now wouldn't *that* be a picture.

He didn't have a shield. Okay, good. George was right. Okay.

Heart stammering, he took a slow breath and nocked an arrow into his bow, quiet.

Dream stepped onto the bridge.

Another breath, he pulled the string back. George could almost hear Sapnap doing the same.

In theory, they could just try shooting him.

Maybe Dream wouldn't be quick enough. Maybe it'd land.

High risk, high reward sort of thing.

But for once, banking on *maybe* wasn't enough.

The risk this time was too high.

So instead, once Dream was at the halfway point, three arrows flew and dug into the wood around his feet, two in front, one in back.

Dream froze.

If they had tried to shoot him, perhaps one would have hit him, but he would have run. He would have run, and with nothing but their bows, they couldn't chase him. This, though, was a warning to be still. And they needed him still.

A second arrow already in place, George jumped from the tree. A moment later, he was standing in front of the bridge, the string pulled back, aiming at the target ahead.

"Not another step, Dream."

For a beat, nothing but the whispering of leaves and the rushing water filled the air. The two stared at each other, fixed in place, and George wondered whether he really was right.

Slowly, Dream removed his hands from his pockets and let them hang by his side.

"Fancy seeing you here," he spoke, voice even. A good sign.

“Unexpected much?”

“A bit.” He shifted on his feet. “What, did you *sprint*?”

He’d never admit he was underestimating them. Even now, he’d find a way to mock.

George wouldn’t rise to the bait, though.

“You’re not getting to the swamps, Dream,” he said coolly.

A pause.

“Where’re your friends?” he asked. He must have been scanning the trees behind that mask of his.

“Letting you face me by yourself is just cold.”

Of course he’d rather have them all in his vision. Provocations wouldn’t work, though.

“I’m not here to fight you,” George responded with a half-shrug. “In fact, I’d like to have your weapons, Dream.”

He huffed. “Right. Trying to level out the playing field?”

George was silent.

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

It was no surprise he did. Rarely did anything pass by Dream, and his opponent’s lack of weaponry wouldn’t either.

“It doesn’t matter if you did,” George said with a quirk of his brow. “If you don’t want to get shot, you’ll listen to me.” He paused. “I might just shoot you anyway, though.”

“Even if I listen?”

“Yes.”

“Why’s that, Georgie?”

George levelled him with a glare. The bastard. He *knew* why.

“Because you’re just so fucking annoying.”

Dream laughed, and barely missed the arrow aimed at his shoulder.

George knew he was wasting them as he nocked another in, but he did not care.

“The next one will land.”

“Alright, alright,” Dream conceded, raising his hands up a bit in surrender. He still sounded too confident for George’s liking. “We can talk about this, though.”

“No, Dream. Stop stalling.”

“I’m not.”

“Right. Weapons, now. I’m not repeating myself again.”



Dream's shoulders were tense. That was the only sign he didn't like his situation. Without his shield, getting through this narrow bridge without suffering several hits was almost impossible. They were good shots, too. George knew all this, and Dream knew all this.

George's whole hope was that Dream would see reason.

Slowly, he began reaching up to his axe and unhooked it. The same with his crossbow. He placed them on the ground and, with some force, slid them towards George.

So far, so good.

At that, Sapnap landed from his tree, and from the corner of his eye, George could see him approach the bridge. His bow was lowered, but not put away. George moved to the side so Sapnap wouldn't block his view of Dream and observed him as Sapnap began gathering the weapons.

"Your bag, too," George said.

Dream snorted. "What, is this a robbery now?"

"Gotta milk you for what you're worth," Sapnap responded with a shrug.

"Are you seriously that broke?"

"You really need to shut up, Dream," George warned before Sapnap could jab back. He narrowed his gaze. "You either listen or I'm putting the next one through your eye."

"You're not *that* good," Dream grunted as he shook off his backpack.

George couldn't keep himself from grinning. From the way Dream froze for a moment it seemed he caught his mistake, too.

"Not *that* good, huh? Dare to find out?"

Dream didn't answer, only threw his bag over to Sapnap.

"Thank you for your cooperation," Sapnap chirped, voice awfully sweet, as he backed off the bridge. "Good to know you have *some* sense."

Again, he was met with silence. Silence rarely meant anything good for them, and George drifted back in front of him. Sapnap had started going through Dream's things to the side, but George kept his eyes trained on Dream, who was staring back. Behind him, George saw Bad jump to the ground, and the two locked gazes. Bad inclined his head towards Dream, and George nodded back. So far, this was going better than they had expected, but tension still plagued George. Dream was motionless as Bad approached him from behind. Once close enough, he put his bow away in favor of searching through his bag.

One second was all it took for Dream to yank an arrow out of the ground and twirl around Bad, securing him in a grip against his chest, the arrowhead pressed against his throat.

One second was always what it fucking took.

"Now, this is better," Dream remarked, and George could hear the grin in his voice. Bad had latched onto the arm around his shoulders but otherwise didn't struggle. Their eyes met for a moment and Bad pulled an apologetic face.

As if *he* had anything to apologize for.

George cringed. God, that was so *careless* of them, leaving anything sharp around him. But arrows? Seriously?

“Here’s what’s gonna happen,” Dream spoke as he nudged Bad forward. “You’re gonna back off, put your bows away, I’ll get my stuff and be on my merry way. Everyone’s happy. Sounds good?”

“You as much as scratch him and I’ll rip your tongue out,” Sapnap growled.

Dream laughed. “Mhm, with *what* ?”

“My fucking teeth.”

“That’s a bit too rough even for my tastes, sorry, Sapnap.”

Sapnap glanced at George and mouthed “*what the fuck*”.

George could only shrug helplessly, ignoring how he could just feel Dream looking at him.

They stepped off the bridge and Dream began leading them to where his things laid, still facing George and Sapnap. Once near enough, he paused, and said something to Bad. It was too quiet for George to pick up, so instead he watched as Bad scrunched up his face and responded in a murmur. Dream swayed his head to the side, shrugging, before he drove the arrow into Bad’s thigh and pushed him off.

With a cry of pain, Bad stumbled to the ground, and Sapnap took off to him, cursing. George jumped to his discarded bow and took out an arrow, but by that point Dream had swiped up all his items and was taking for the trees. George let the arrow fly anyway. To no one’s surprise, it missed its mark, and Dream disappeared in the forest.

George had half a mind to chase him, but that’d be too stupid even for him. He couldn’t leave an injured Bad behind, either, even if it didn’t look like a serious wound.

*Well, damn.*

“Are you okay?” George asked as he jogged up to Bad, who was sitting on ground, hissing, as Sapnap inspected the hit.

“I’m fine,” he breathed out. “It’s shallow enough.”

“It’ll still need bandages,” Sapnap concluded. He looked sour. “That bastard.”

“Language, please,” Bad sighed.

“Sorry,” Sapnap muttered. “That was just such a dirty play.”

“I thought him using an arrow was pretty smart,” Bad remarked. “He sure knows how to make do with anything.”

“Don’t compliment him, Bad,” Sapnap whined.

“Acknowledging your opponent's strengths is important!”

“What did he even say to you?” George wondered.

“Oh, he asked how likely it was that we wouldn’t follow him,” Bad said with a shrug. “I asked what did he think. Guess this was his insurance,” he finished with a meek smile.

“Ugh, he is the absolute worst,” Sapnap groaned. “God, but that’s so annoying! We were close, too!”

“It’s okay, there will be a next time,” Bad said, pulling a small smile and Sapnap and George helped him to his feet. “This was a good attempt. But what about our primary goal, Sapnap?”

Right, because capturing Dream had not, actually, been their main objective. Not that they could have afforded to let him know.

“Oh yeah, I hid the tracker well. He’s not finding it anytime soon.”

“Then it’s a success,” Bad grinned. “Hold on, lemme...”

He reached into his pouch and retrieved the compass. His face brightened.

“Yup, it’s working.”

That was such a bizarre idea.

“May I see it?” George asked.

He didn’t need to, really, but.

“Sure.” Bad handed him the device. “This is exciting!”

“It’ll be exciting when we get that arrow out of you,” Sapnap said, but couldn’t keep himself from smirking. “And then we’ll be on our way to repay *everything* in full.”

As they walked back towards the walls of Taswell, George grasped the compass and watched as the little red arrow pointed towards the forest, moving slightly from time to time. Couple this little instrument with Bad’s prediction skills, and George understood what Bad meant by “exciting”.

Finally, they’d have an advantage. They’d have something over Dream that he wouldn’t be expecting. He’d continue underestimating them, and they’d make that cockiness work for *them*.

George’s hold on the compass tightened. *Yeah, I’ll make you regret it.*

## Chapter End Notes

you: awh nice some more dnf  
me: haha worldbuilding go brr

Couldn't help it, I wanna establish the setting better:)) i suffered so much writing this tho. i am simply not smart enough for this shit oh my god

I'd really really appreciate it if you told me what you thought, though!! u can also hit me up on [tumblr](https://www.tumblr.com/), i crave interactions and i will love u

Hope u enjoyed and until next time:))

## Chapter 4

### Chapter Notes

uh whoops my bad lol

so um. how about we just. ignore the uh. small gap in between haha. it wasn't even that big anyway, could have been worse, in my defence

honestly I have no idea where the time went lmao, but, on the bright side! I actually have a lotta motivation for this again! which was completely out of nowhere, mind you! I literally started this chapter three days ago ayup haha

but uh yea here u go, if ur reading this because u got a notif, o/ hi how are u lol

(remember to subscribe if you enjoy btw cause who knows when the next update will come out I am so sorry)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dream frowned as he studied the map, careful as to not put another tear in it. He glanced up at the gates of a village peeking through the trees, back down, but for the life of him he couldn't figure out where the hell this was. He'd been sure he was following a path to Stal when he'd left the swamp, but in this mass of Wilderness there shouldn't have been any towns. Was this map really that outdated? Or did he suck at navigation more than he'd thought?

Sighing, he folded the paper and pocketed it. Even if this was a bit annoying, he wouldn't say no to some civilization right about now. His dearest weapons have gotten blunt to an unacceptable degree, which absolutely had to be fixed. Not only that, suspicious berries and dry rabbit were great and all, but even that got stale at some point.

The civilization might say no to him, though, given his less-than-proper look.

In his defence, the Wilderness was not kind on anyone.

Still, Dream strolled towards the gates, and, disregarding the dubious looks, asked the guards for some help with directions. On their own, much shinier map, they pointed at this village, and, wow, okay, yeah, Dream had overshot by *quite* a bit.

This was... embarrassing.

They might have been more insisting he went on his way if not for the falling night. That'd be cruel, honestly, and so Dream was allowed inside the small town. The people of these kinds of settlements, not inside any country or walls, were known for their paranoia. When there was no one to defend them but themselves, being overly cautious was what kept them alive. Dream would know.

Another con of civilization—you needed money to get by. Which, well, Dream wasn't swimming in.

Especially since he got fucking *robbed*. He was only mocking the hunters, but were they seriously

broke themselves? That would just be sad.

Still, though, Dream managed to fish enough loose coin from the bottom of his backpack to afford a room for one night at the shadiest inn in town. Only a few patrons were still up, sulking in corners and nursing their tenth glass of... whatever they got to forget their lives, weary-eyed and throwing distrustful looks at Dream as he made his way through the bar towards the stairs. No doubt sizing him up, judging his potential value, wondering whether he'll be one of those tourists that always forgot to lock their doors.

He felt right at home.

After barricading himself and listening for any footsteps for a short while, Dream finally let his shoulders sag, dropped his bag on the floor, and flopped down onto the creaky bed. It was less mattress and more lumps, moth-eaten and moldy, but after sleeping on moss and in trees for weeks (if not months at this point), it was cloud-like.

He was out like a light in no time.

The next morning, famished but refreshed, Dream set out to explore a bit of the town. He exchanged whatever scraps of coin he still had left for a few slices of stale bread at the bar and left the inn with the poise of a man drowning in riches.

That was how you got by with absolutely no penny to your name in a place full of paranoid folk. You pretended stealing was beneath you, and while they eyed the more twitchy and anxious, you yanked their apples and swiped their wallets.

It would have been even better if Dream actually *looked* the part, though.

A guy who hadn't changed his clothes in... much longer than he'd like to admit with a cracked and slightly bloodied mask wasn't exactly the image of a gentleman.

Dream was lucky others somehow managed to look worse.

As nice as it was to mingle with civilization once in awhile, he couldn't afford to stay for long, though. What he needed was to fix his weapons, refill some of his supplies, and he'd be back on the road.

The issue, once again, was money.

You could only get so much from pickpocketing in a self-sufficient town. They weren't exactly known for being rich.

Which was fair enough, actually. When there was no one to defend you but yourself, you didn't want to make yourself a target any more than you had to.

Once again, Dream would know.

As Dream entered the lone smithy of this settlement, the blacksmith—a burly fellow—appeared in the shop whilst wiping his hands, muttering something under his breath. Weirdly enough, he didn't bat an eye at Dream's appearance; probably used to all sorts of odd customers. While you could get various regular tools here, this *was* also a weapons' store.

That helped with the spike of uneasiness Dream'd always get when put into a social situation.

“What can I do for ya?” the man spoke, though it was more of a grunt than anything.

*Time to put those nonexistent social skills to use.*

“Yes, hi, I was wondering if you could help me out,” Dream started, cheery, pressing his hands together as if in prayer. “See, I have these few blades that’ve gotten a bit blunt and chipped, and my shield broke not too long ago, but, issue is—I’m a survivalist, right, so I don’t really, uh, have a lot of coin on me, but!” Dream rushed to speak as he saw the blacksmith opening his mouth, no doubt about to kick him out. “I can work for it! I’m pretty good with my hands, and I can do all sorts of stuff, like, um, assemble arrows and bows, fix crossbows and the like. So, uh, y’know, maybe we could work something out?”

That was the most Dream could offer—if it didn’t work, well. The next few nights wouldn’t be fun.

Already he’d had way more close calls without his shield than he’d like.

The blacksmith eyed him up and down, assessing.

“Survivalist, eh?” he grumbled. “Hm. Well, go on then,” He gestured towards the forge with his head. “There’s lots of work to be done if you’re up for it.”

Dream nodded, sighing in relief once the man turned his back to him. He hadn’t expected for him to agree this easily, and he was more than happy about it. Usually he’d have to butter up any smith or merchant for much longer to get his way, and even that worked rarely.

Funnily enough, it was the blacksmiths of larger towns and cities that gave most trouble. No leeway to anyone whatsoever. Understandable, but annoying.

“Survivalists these days are getting younger and younger,” the man muttered as he rummaged through some crates. “Wasting your youth, I say.”

Dream cracked a smile. Ah, lectures. Hadn’t had those in a hot minute. “What’s the point in being young if you’re not being stupid?”

The guy huffed at that. “Even if it’ll get you killed?”

“I’m still alive, so I’d say I’m doing pretty well on that.”

“And how long have you been at it?”

Dream grimaced under his mask. “I lost track a while ago.”

It was true, too—he knew he was somewhere in his early twenties, but it’s a bit hard to count the years when days and weeks blurred together. Not that it mattered anyway. People cared too much about these things.

The blacksmith only shook his head as he picked up a larger crate and dropped it onto a table. “These heads need to be recast. Get ‘em off the arrows first, then I’ll tell you what to do next.”

They fell into a silence after that. Dream was not a fan of conversation that lasted longer than several minutes, so when the man got back to his whetstone and worked on the few swords he had besides him without another word, Dream let himself relax and get to his own task. Easy stuff, and if a few hours of work will get him some sharpened weapons and a new shield, it’d be a bargain of his lifetime.

Though above everything Dream preferred open spaces and the woods, he had to admit, being in a

forge after so long was comforting in a way he couldn't explain. Something about the hammering of steel, about the heat from furnaces, about the distinct smell of coal dust, so thick in the air and yet not oppressive, something about all of that felt *safe*. Quiet, though not in a literal way. It was one of the only times Dream could let his thoughts wind down, shutting off his mind and working only with his hands, not having to think about anything. And though he loved the thrill of the hunt, it was nice to let himself rest once in a blue moon.

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By the time the sun began to set, a satisfying exhaustion from the day had set upon Dream, one that didn't make his heart race but instead lulled him to sleep. From fixing bows to melting iron to assembling pieces of modest armor, Dream tried his hand at anything he could with his limited skill set while the blacksmith worked on more complex things. After he was done with his tasks, he repaired Dream's weapons' blunt and mildly chipped blades, and as Dream held his cherished axe and traced along its deadly edge with his gloved hand, a giddiness bubbled up. Oh, he couldn't *wait* to get back on the road and try it out.

"This is perfect, thank you!" Dream gushed, turning to look at the man who was cleaning the whetstone.

He shrugged. "A deal's a deal. The shields are up front." He paused, casting Dream a scrutinizing look. "And get yourself a better one. It's hell out there."

There was a tone of bitterness to his voice, something left hanging in the air, but Dream let it be. He knew better than to push a conversation that was over.

Besides, who was he to argue? If the man wanted to be generous for whatever reason, he wasn't going to refuse. It wasn't often people took kindly to him, and if there was anything Dream had learned during his life on the run, was that you took all the grains of kindness you could get.

There wasn't much to choose from in a small shop like this, but Dream would have taken a plank with a handle at that point, and what inventory the shop *did* have was nothing to scoff at. All the shields were clearly made with much care and it didn't take long for Dream to find his fit. Already he felt safer having it strapped to him, and it really was a wonder how he'd lasted this long without one.

His eye was caught, however, by the display of crossbows at the other side. He still had his own, a pretty thing he'd managed to snatch from a distracted travelling merchant, and he loved it to bits, but it'd been years and it had definitely seen better days. Lately, he'd even been avoiding using it in fear of it breaking. Pretty things didn't last forever, as sad as that was.

Dream migrated to the weapons, unable to resist the pull. Even if he knew there was no way he'd be able to afford one—from experience he knew smiths never gave these things away without some coin—he couldn't help spend some time marvelling. Careful, he picked a particularly enticing one, on the smaller side and sturdy, but light enough. Pulling it back wasn't difficult either with the little device it had, much easier than his own, and wow, if only Dream wasn't completely broke.

"Out of curiosity, how much do these cost?" Dream called.

The blacksmith entered the shop and, once he saw what Dream was holding, sighed.

"They're custom-made, I've put them up just for show," he said as he went to dust off the front counter.

“Right, okay, but let’s say if I—”

Dream was cut off by the shrill ringing of a bell. He hadn’t heard it many times before, given how rarely he even went to towns, but the few he did were enough to cement in the meaning.

He locked gazes with the blacksmith, whose face grew dark.

“Pillagers,” he growled, as if a curse.

*Of course* the one time Dream visited a village there had a be a fucking attack.

Already in fight or flight more, he went to the windows and glanced into the quickly darkening streets. What glimpses he got before the blacksmith shut the wooden blinds were of people sprinting down the road, some dragging kids in one direction, some with spears and swords in the other. Screams tore through the air as the unmistakable sound of whooshing arrows followed.

All of this danger for some sense of independence. Dream would be a hypocrite if he judged them, though.

“Those bastards never grow tired,” the man spat as he bolted the door shut. “Third attack this month, bunch of savages.”

“Are there any other entryways?” Dream asked, trying to map out all the ways one could get in and out in his head.

“Yes, out the back,” he said, turning, and as soon as he spoke, a crash sounded from further within.

*Well, too late for that.*

The man swore as he grabbed the nearest mace whilst Dream put down the crossbow and unlatched his axe. In such close quarters, a blade did much better than a bolt, anyway. Fighting in closed spaces was always a pain, though, and he’d much rather take it to the outside. Or avoid it altogether, really. He had enough problems of his own; getting into others’ messes on top of that was never a fun idea.

Unfortunately for him, the universe didn’t care what he wanted.

The two entered the forge just as three pillagers barged in, weapons at the ready and bloodthirst in their eyes. The closest two went for the blacksmith, the more threatening of the pair, while the third aimed his crossbow at Dream’s head.

Dream didn’t give the guy the chance to fire the next arrow when the first one missed by an inch as he leapt over the table and swung at him with his axe.

Somehow, the pillager managed to pull up his shield barely in time to block the hit, the blade burying in deep. As if that did him any good; Dream tore his axe away along with the shield and smashed the wood across the guy’s skull, sending him to the ground. Give them no time to think, that was the recipe for success. If that meant Dream had to not think too, well. Good thing his instincts never failed him.

Wasting no time, Dream let his axe go and yanked up the discarded loaded crossbow, swinging around and releasing the bolt at one of the pillagers who’d been about to slash open the blacksmith who was busy defending himself from the other one. It pierced through the guy’s eye, his body stumbling back a step before collapsing. The blacksmith took the opportunity to overpower the final one and bashed his head in with the mace.



In short, by the end of it, the forge was turned into a bloody mess.

“You okay?” Dream asked.

The man grunted in affirmation. He glanced back at the pillager Dream had shot, back at Dream, and nodded.

“Good lad,” he muttered.

For a second, he disappeared back into the shop and came back with the crossbow Dream had been fawning over, all but shoving it into Dream’s hands.

“You’ll have more use for this than any of these sorry folk around,” he grumbled.

Dream grinned. “Oh, I definitely plan to. Thank you so much.”

Maybe sometimes the stars didn’t hate him.

The shrieks have gotten more frequent and more intense, though, and as much as Dream would have loved to stay holed up here, he had to get out of this town as soon as possible. With a quick farewell, he left the forge, the blacksmith shutting the last exit tight behind him.

Once in the streets, the chaos of it all disoriented Dream for a beat. People ran in all directions, loud orders mixing in with the screams of those shot, and Dream stayed by the edges to not get swept into that whole mess. You trip, and you’re practically a goner with how frantic mobs could get.

At least the lighting wasn’t a problem anymore—not with how high the fires roared.

These people should seriously start investing in building material that wasn’t wood.

It was just Dream’s luck the smithy was practically in the middle of town; it’d take forever to get through these streets to the walls, especially if he didn’t want to lose a limb or two. Luckily for him, sneaking around enemies was sort of Dream’s forte. Making yourself unnoticeable was a skill that more often than not decided between life and death, and, well, when there were dozens of people running around, just begging to be targeted, it wasn’t exactly that hard to pull off.

It would have been great, too, if that was how it went until he was out. It would have been absolutely perfect if Dream managed to slip out of here with only a few hindrances here and there, nothing he couldn’t handle, but no. Of course, his eyes had to wander. And of course, his eyes had to land on the one thing that managed to almost make him trip on his own feet.

Dream had gotten lost. That much was obvious from the fact he was at this town, so far away from where he’d intended to go. And the thing about tracking was that it kinda depended on the one being tracked to know where the hell he was going. So, Dream had been *certain* that, at the very least, his pursuers would have gotten lost, too. Especially after that hell of a swamp, where all evidence of anyone going through was lost to the waters.

But somehow, *somehow*, not only did they apparently not get lost, they managed to stay right on his heels. Without him ever suspecting it.

*Well, damn.*

Maybe he’d pissed them off too much last time and they were now being serious.

That... wouldn't be optimal, he had to admit.

Now, Dream could have let it be regardless. Could have used the chaos to get out and by the time they'd realized he was gone, he could be far, far away.

But then he saw Sapnap chase after an injured pillager around the corner and Bad run to a crying child, blocking stray arrows shot their way, and Dream was left staring at George, in the middle of the street, dealing with two of them at once. He wanted to leave, he really did, but his feet were rooted in place and his hands were already loading his new crossbow. By this point, he knew better than to try to rationalize his actions—it was how it was, and when a third one caught sight of George and decided to *rudely* insert himself, he managed to take only one step in his direction before a bolt lodged itself in his throat.

*Yeah, no, fuck off.*

George didn't take notice of that—trying not to get stabbed required a lot of attention, after all. He managed to dodge a particularly close lunge, stepping around the guy and plunging his sword into his back, using him as a shield against the second one. Although Dream wished he could help out more, they were too close to each other and moving too fast, and even if Dream was confident enough in his marksmanship skills, even he wouldn't dare to take the risk. Fortunately, it wasn't needed; George took care of the other quickly enough, too. As was expected.

He heaved as he glanced around, no doubt looking for his teammates, but his search was cut short by another pillager running up to him, axe raised. George prepared himself to deflect it, but half a second later the guy crumbled to the ground, a bolt sticking out of his temple. *That* caught George's attention.

He whipped to where Dream had shot, but he'd already moved along the building's wall into an alleyway, into the shadows, in the hopes George would just let it go and be on his way. Maybe find his friends and regroup, and get the hell out of this place, too. But then again, when was George ever rational? Instead, he narrowed his eyes and began approaching, wary, the paranoia written clearly on his face.

Dream had no one to blame for that but himself, really.

He watched around the corner as George got close to the building, the frown now much more pronounced, especially after he could find nothing no matter where he looked. Sighing, he turned around, probably ready to head back down the street, but Dream wouldn't have that. George had practically come to him, and as much as his sensible side yelled he just needed to get out of there, Dream had questions.

Besides. It'd been awhile since Dream'd had a proper conversation with him. That *had* to be remedied.

Within a second, Dream stepped out of the shadows, latched onto George's forearm and pulled him into the alleyway, and all George could react with was a gasp before Dream had him against his chest, dagger to his throat.

Now *this* was how it was supposed to go. Not the other way around.

"Shh," Dream shushed him, quiet, as he slowly retreated back into the darkness, stopping against a wall. "Drop the sword, George."

"I knew it was *you*," George hissed, struggling against Dream's hold with one hand.

“Nice to know I’m always on your mind. Drop the sword and stop squirming.” For good measure, he pressed the blade closer. “Now.”

Dream could feel the irritation rolling off George in waves as he stilled and let his weapon fall to the ground.

“Good boy,” Dream chirped, barely dodging when George threw his head back in an attempt to bash him. Dream laughed, “George! Stop it, seriously!”

“Stop being so annoying, then,” he snapped. “What do you want from me?”

“What do I— I don’t want anything from you.” Well, that was a blatant lie, but George didn’t need to know that. “But tell me what you’re doing here.”

“Take a wild guess, Dream,” George drawled.

“Okay, no, I meant— *How* are you here? You weren’t—”

“We weren’t supposed to be this close?” George scoffed, and Dream could almost hear the smirk in his voice. “Maybe you’re just bad, ever consider that?”

“Haha, very funny, but seriously.”

“I *am* being serious.”

“What, I wasn’t bad for almost two years and now I suddenly am? C’mon now.”

“Maybe you’ve lost your touch. Or maybe you should stop underestimating us.”

“Oh, that’s cute, remind me, who’s holding who at knifepoint?”

George was silent, but the way his mood dropped even further was obvious even without seeing his expression.

“Thought so. Now, *maybe* stop being all smart and tell me the truth. How did you find me so quick?”

“Or what?” George asked, his voice quiet. “You’ll slash my throat?” He strained his head so Dream could see a part of his face. There was no fear in his eyes. “We both know you won’t.”

He got him there, Dream had to admit.

“It’s more of a precaution, really,” Dream said with a chuckle. “So that you wouldn’t slash mine. Then again, I doubt you would, too.”

“Want to test that out?”

“No thanks. I’m good where I am.”

“I’m sure you are,” he muttered.

A shout from the street caught their attention. Dream snapped his head towards the street where, in the light, Sappnap came into view, frantically looking around, calling for George. Dream felt the way George’s breath hitched but before he could as much as open his mouth, Dream tightened his hold and dug the blade closer, barely not breaking skin.

“Stay. Quiet,” Dream whispered. “While I’m not gonna hurt *you*, that doesn’t extend to your friends. So keep them out of this, got it?”

George didn’t respond, but by the way he stilled Dream guessed he got the memo.

They waited in silence until Sappap went out of vision, then a little more. Finally, Dream let himself relax. This was dragging on for too long.

“Alright, keep your secrets, but then at least tell me why you’re bothering yourself with those pillagers?” Dream asked.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” George muttered.

“I would, actually. Seems pretty stupid.”

“Oh, and that’s coming from *you*?”

Dream sighed. He wasn’t getting anywhere like this.

“Okay, how ‘bout a deal, then? You tell me what I wanna know, I let you go.”

“And I should trust that... why again?”

“I’m a man of my word,” he said, shrugging. Then, he leaned in closer, dropping his voice. “You should know that.”

George tensed, as if he hadn’t been on edge before. Dream grinned. *Sensitive topic much?*

“Fine,” George spoke through clenched teeth. “These towns pay for every pillager’s head, *idiot*. Double that for an evoker’s. I thought you knew these things, with how *smart* you are.”

Dream ignored the obvious provocation. Instead, he latched onto a *very* interesting piece of information.

“There’s an evoker in this raid?” he asked, voice quiet with fascination.

George must have realized his mistake, what with how he shook his head, quick to protest, “*No*, Dream, you— There isn’t anything— It’s was a *general remark* —”

“You saw one, didn’t you?” Dream cut him off, giddy. “How? They never leave their mansions.”

“I don’t know *how*, it’s just—” George groaned as he, again, caught his mistake. “Whatever, it doesn’t matter, it’s none of your business, so stay out of it.”

“It’s very much my business! George, we’re talking about an *evoker*!” Dream laughed, euphoric with this new turn of events. “Oh, I’m definitely going after that.”

“And I’m going after you the minute you release me, then,” George threatened. “And *I’m* not against hurting you at all.”

Dream didn’t bring up how George was implying he wouldn’t have gone after him otherwise; he would have loved to—never one to miss a chance to point out George’s slip-ups—but another thought popped into his head, one that attracted more of his focus.

“Why don’t we work something out?” he spoke up.

“And what is that supposed to mean.”

“I mean, why don’t we, y’know, not fight over it. I help you take out as many pillagers as I can, including the evoker, you keep all the profit and I keep whatever the evoker has on them,” Dream grinned. “Sounds like a pretty good deal if you ask me.”

“You’re suggesting I *ally* myself with you?” George huffed, finding the idea ridiculous. “No way.”

“Right, so you make out with me but draw the line at fighting a common enemy. Explain your logic to me, George.”

In Dream’s defence, the bait was *right there*. Maybe this wasn’t the perfect time to bring it up again, but hey, when had he cared about tactful?

George sputtered in response, his words unintelligible, and what Dream wouldn’t give to see his face right now. Frantic, George shook his head, and Dream had to pull the dagger back to not cut him.

“You— It wasn’t— Don’t—”

“Calm down, George, it’s not that big of a deal,” he chuckled. “If it makes you feel any better, you’re very good at it.”

That, obviously, *didn’t* make George feel better, and instead made him choke on air.

“Oh my god, just— kill me already,” he all but groaned.

“C’mon, it couldn’t have been *that* bad.”

“It’s *so* not about that.”

“So you admit it wasn’t bad?”

“I swear to God, Dream, I will *walk* into this knife.”

Dream giggled, unable to keep himself from beaming. “I like it when you’re flustered, y’know.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Nothing, actually, I’m just being honest.”

“Well *don’t*. In fact, never bring this up ever again, because I *will* strangle you and then myself.”

“Didn’t know you were into that.”

“*Dream!* ”

“Fine, fine, keep it down,” Dream quieted, chuckles still bubbling up. “So, how ‘bout that deal, huh?”

“Oh my god,” George whispered, and he sounded almost in pain. “Alright, fine, just— Shut up about it.”

“Great, knew you’d be on board,” Dream chirped. “I’m gonna let you go now, so play nice.”

George muttered something under his breath, probably a threat, but Dream paid no mind to it. He

pulled the blade away and unwound his arm from around George's shoulders, letting George step away. It was less stepping away, though, and more scrambling as far back as possible, to no one's surprise. Even if it was too dark to see, Dream didn't doubt George's face was still flushed, and the mere thought almost made him giggle again.

George cleared his throat, straightening. "Bad and Sarnap could still see you, though, if just go out like that."

Among everything else, Dream also didn't bring up how that *shouldn't* have been a concern to him. Wasn't Dream the priority here, not the raid?

It was fascinating, on some level, how quickly George could lose sight of what should have mattered most to him the moment Dream was alone with him.

"I'll keep myself away from them," Dream said, sheathing his dagger and instead taking out his axe. "Nice to know you worry, though."

"I don't— You are *so* annoying."

"Yeah, so you keep saying."

George huffed, turning away. "Whatever."

It was endearing, the way George would cross his arms and frown at him, as if he wished for nothing more than to punch him. It was a different sort of endearing from when he actually did. And even more different from when he looked like he wanted to do anything but. Dream had seen that only once, and he'd already gotten addicted.

If only George knew.

Dream bent down and picked up the discarded sword, extending it in George's direction. George eyed him for a moment, wary, before he slowly approached and reached out to take it back. When their hands brushed, Dream grabbed hold of his and pulled him in, George all but colliding into his chest.

George looked up at him, already scowling, but when Dream bent closer, his free hand ghosting under his jaw, it melted away, replaced by something more... conflicted.

*There it is.*

Dream grinned beneath his mask.

"Try to keep up," he whispered, and with that, he stepped back, leaving George in the shadows as he went back into the streets, not looking back.

Dream couldn't keep the delirious smile off his face.

It was so rare when his heart raced not from danger, but something else entirely.

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As Dream hatched through yet another raider, his blood coloring Dream's clothes and mixing in with however many had come before him, Dream marvelled how convenient it was he'd managed to get his weapons fixed right before. If he hadn't, this wouldn't have nearly been as effective. The shield in particular was a godsend; these pillagers loved their crossbows almost as much as Dream

did, and without a way to block the rain of bolts, Dream would have been full of holes by now.

Even if the waves seemed to never end, it was bearable as he wasn't the only one out on the hunt. The annoying part was actually locating his main target. With the dozens upon dozens of raiders all storming the streets, finding a particular one was much harder than it sounded. He couldn't disregard the possibility George had been wrong and there *wasn't* an evoker here, which would really be a shame. It'd be more of a scam than anything, since then Dream would truly not gain anything from this. So, as he butchered through the ranks left and right, he searched for any sign of the infamous pillager.

Despite everything, it'd be more surprising if an evoker was actually present. Their kind was so rare, and, as Dream had said, they almost never left their safe-havens. Too much of a target, even if their otherworldly abilities let them put up a good fight. Maybe it was a deserter? Maybe they were hired? Whatever the reason, if one was truly here somewhere, Dream would find them, and he *would* have their head.

He'd almost given up on his pursuit, his energy quickly dwindling, when, near one of the outer walls, he spotted a ghastly creature, barely the size of a child, floating around and lunging itself at everyone around. He'd never seen one of those before, but he'd heard they were a nightmare to deal with. More importantly, however, it was a telltale sign of a nearby evoker, and so his excitement once again spiked.

From there, it wasn't long before he caught sight of the actual pillager. Tucked away in a corner, away from prying eyes, as he drew runes on the ground, letting loose more of those phantoms on the town. Dream waited in the shadows until the fresh wave of them flew over his head, aiming at more rowdy targets, and sneaked around the buildings to the pillagers guarding the evoker.

He would have preferred to keep this quiet, but alas. No one is exactly quiet when you bury an axe into their chest, and his fight with the few pillagers quickly attracted the attention of the evoker. He switched up his runes in a beat, and on top of dodging the raiders' attacks, Dream now had to worry about the ground biting at him.

Yeah, definitely not a fan of *this* one.

It was taking far longer than he would have liked to get through the defences, and, in fact, he was getting pushed back. While taking on groups wasn't anything new to him, usually there wouldn't be magic included in the equation, which, admittedly, made it significantly harder. Their numbers were going down too slowly, and they were delivering too many close hits. Dream had to begin considering pulling away when one of them, farther back, dropped dead with an arrow sticking out of his forehead.

Dream's face stretched into a grin. *Now* they wouldn't stand a chance.

With newfound adrenaline, Dream began cutting through the pillagers without worrying too much about any strays that he'd have to defend against. From the corner of his eye he caught glimpses of them stumbling to the ground whenever they'd get too close, arrows lodged into their chests. And just like that, he made it within attacking range of the evoker, all of his guards down, and the guy at that point scrambled up to his feet and began retreating. Dream was quicker, though, and before the evoker could as much as get out of his circle, Dream had shoved a dagger into his back.

When he finally fell to his knees and to the ground, blood covering up the chalk, Dream took a moment to catch his breath. He put away his dagger and knelt next to the body, turning it over so it'd face him. He rummaged through the guy's clothes, leaving no pocket unturned, until he brushed over something solid *within* the cloth. With his knife, he tore the fabric open and took out

a simple wooden doll, something you'd find at any child's house if not for the gleaming gem eyes.

It really didn't make sense why an evoker would be part of a raid. They were their captain's last line of defence, something to guarantee their survival by going against the force of nature, so they rarely left a captain's side. And *those* didn't usual bother themselves with towns as small as this. Still, there either had to be one somewhere in these streets, or this evoker was... doing something else.

He really, really shouldn't have been.

Grinning, Dream pocketed his new treasure, something he'd never thought he'd lay his hands on, and was beginning to get up when a sword pressed against his neck over his shoulder, making him freeze.

Ah, right, he'd... forgotten about that.

"Thought we had a deal," Dream said, tone still light.

"We did," he heard George speak behind him, nonchalant. "It didn't say anything about a truce, though."

"It was sorta implied, y'know."

"Even so, the evoker's dead, I helped you, you got your stuff. What did you expect would happen next?"

"This feels like a scam," Dream chuckled. "Not exactly fair."

"Oh, I'm sorry, do you have a complaint? Feel free to forward it to someone who actually cares." The blade tapped against his shoulder. "Hands up."

He had to admire the persistence, really.

Slowly, Dream raised them, but before George could say anything else, Dream whipped around away from the sword and jabbed his elbow into his knees, making them buckle and giving him the opportunity he needed. He jumped to his feet and sprinted down the narrow alley, George's footsteps falling not too far behind. He took turns at random, only trying to stay away from the main streets where he risked running into the rest of George's team. However, because he just couldn't catch a break, he managed to get into an alleyway with a dead end. Great.

*Note to self for next time—figure out the goddamn layout of places you go to, idiot.*

Having nothing else to do, he started going through the doors, hoping he'd find an unlocked one so he wouldn't have to risk injuring himself further by trying to break it down. Luckily, as he turned the handle of the last one, it opened, and he barged inside.

It would have been quite the mess if there were people on the other side, but the rooms were dark and quiet, no one around to be seen. Well, at least not *everything* was going wrong. These sort of buildings usually had doors on the other side, or at the very least windows, but instead of heading for that, Dream paused. Not only was he wildly out of breath, his body moaning from all the exertion, running through the entire town and for who knows how longer didn't sound like the most appealing thing in the world.

Instead, maybe he could try working something out.



So, he moved into the shadows by the wall, next to the open door, and waited, trying to quiet down his breathing. Faraway, he could still hear the chaos, though it sounded like it was receding. He listened for anything outside, knowing George had to be near, and, sure enough, he heard it. George had slowed down, no doubt scanning his surroundings for any sign of Dream as he went closer to the house. Dream stood still as a statue, waiting, as George finally stepped through the door, careful. He was gripping his sword with one hand, glancing around, on guard. Slowly, we stepped deeper inside, his eyes missing Dream, until Dream deemed he was far enough in and shut the door.

George whirled around at the sound but before he could react, Dream had closed the distance between them and took hold of his arms, pushing him back and slamming him against the wall. George yelled in pain as Dream pinned his hands next to his head, gripping his wrists tight enough so his hold on the weapon weakened and the blade tumbled to the floor.

Honestly, it felt like George was putting himself into these situations on purpose.

“I really don’t get you,” Dream murmured, observing the way George’s face, so close to his own, twisted into a scowl. “You know you can’t take me one on one. Why do you keep trying?”

George stayed silent, choosing to only glare at him instead.

“Why are you alone, Georgie?”

“I couldn’t find them,” he muttered. “And *stop* calling me that.”

Dream leaned in, grinning. “Couldn’t find them, or... were you looking for something else?”

He could see the way his throat moved as he swallowed, his breath coming out in a shudder. Still, he narrowed his eyes at Dream.

“You think too highly of yourself.”

“With good reason.”

“Definitely not.”

“Fine, but at least I *think*.” He cocked his head at him. “And you? How come this is the second time in one day you’re at my mercy? You literally walked into it, you realize that, right?”

Even if Dream was teasing, he was genuinely curious, too. As much as George claimed about wanting to cut Dream down, he wasn’t being particularly effective about it. And Dream knew he could be, if he genuinely tried. Even in this situation, George knew Dream would be going after the evoker; he could have easily found his friends in the meantime and gone after Dream together, but instead, he was by himself. Either he was legitimately an idiot with no thoughts in that pretty head of his, or there was something else. As much as Dream liked to joke about it, he also had to admit George wasn’t, in fact, an idiot, in most cases. So this was where the dilemma rose.

“Just let me go already,” George grumbled after a long pause, trying to wrench his hands free. Dream only held them tighter.

“So that you could, what, try to attack me again?”

“I won’t, alright?”

“You already proved I can’t trust you on that.”

"I actually never said I wouldn't before," George remarked, quirking his brow. "You just assumed I wouldn't. That's on you."

"Mm, maybe. Still."

"And what do you suggest we do instead, then?"

"I'm thinking about it."

"Oh, please, take your time, no rush," George said, dry. Dream ignored it.

He considered him, the way he was shifting against the wall, his eyes darting to the side, unable to look at Dream for longer than a couple of seconds. He also didn't miss the way how, even in this dim light from the street, he could see his face growing in color. Maybe there really were some thoughts in that pretty head of his, and, oh, Dream would give the world to hear just one of them.

"Why do you keep looking away?" he asked, hushed.

"Am I just supposed to keep staring at that gnarly mask of yours?" George huffed. "It's creepy."

"Would you prefer I took it off?"

Air caught in George's throat, and whatever he tried to say in response came out only as a strangled noise. The way he blinked at him, irregular as if trying to chase something away, was downright an offence.

Slowly, Dream eased his grip on George's wrists. He trailed a hand down his arm, stopping by the side of his neck. He traced his jaw with his thumb, just shy of his lips, and for the first time in a long while he wished he didn't have gloves on. George stood frozen, eyes glazed over with something Dream couldn't quite read, boring holes into his mask. If he didn't have it on, Dream was sure he could feel his breath on his skin. The mere thought frenzied his insides, pushing his mind into overdrive.

He leaned in closer.

"Would you, George?"

George opened his mouth and for a moment just looked at him. As if not understanding what he was seeing. Then, within a beat, the clouds from his eyes passed and they came alive again, along with the rest of his body. Dream had no time to react before George slipped his other hand free and grabbed hold of the front of his jacket, twisting them around and banging Dream against the wall, knocking some of the air out of his lungs. George's face had hardened with a glower, the irritation thick in the air between them.

Okay, well, Dream hadn't expected *that*.

In hindsight, he should have—George never acted in the way Dream thought he would—but hindsight was always twenty-twenty.

"I'm not your plaything, Dream," George snapped, and if looks could kill, Dream would have been a goner where he stood. "Stop treating me as one."

*'I never said you are'* rested on his tongue, but Dream bit it down.

Instead, he brought his hands up and wrapped them around George's, still clenching his front,

applying no pressure.

“You say as if that’d be a bad thing,” he chuckled. “You’re too serious about it.”

“Do you think this is funny? Do you think what you’re doing is hilarious?”

*No.*

“A little bit.”

“You are *such* a bastard. I really, seriously hate you.”

His voice was dripping with venom, chilling and biting, and in that moment, Dream didn’t doubt his words.

Something lodged in Dream’s throat, stretching out and burying deep in his chest, making it hard to breathe. No matter how hard he tried to shake it off, the sudden tension, bordering on painful, refused to leave.

“It’s not my fault you can’t decide what you want,” Dream drawled.

“I *do* know what I want. It’s *you* who’s playing this stupid game of... whatever the hell this is.”

“Yeah?” Dream laughed, cold. “You say you hate me. Act like it, then.”

That took George aback, and Dream used the moment of surprise to wrench his hands off, pushing him away. George stumbled back, putting up no resistance, and just stared at him, clenching his hands by his sides. As if *he* was the only one that could be annoyed in this situation. As if somehow Dream was responsible that George kept sending mixed signals.

“Next time, don’t separate yourself from your friends if you *actually* want to have a chance of taking me down,” Dream huffed. “Otherwise, my patience will run out eventually.”

With that, he turned away, heading for the door. He knew that George wouldn’t do anything now, not with the threat still hanging in the air. How serious it was didn’t matter. As long as it got the message across.

George was getting too comfortable in being reckless and expecting Dream to accommodate for it.

## Chapter End Notes

i swear everytime i write this fic i fucking lose it

i don't know what i channel but i channel something

hope the four months were worth it lmao????

but anyway!! if you enjoyed, do leave a comment, they absolutely make my day and I swear, they help with motivation way more than you'd think lol. which. is rich coming from me but. hey I'm here now haha

shameless self-promo time—come talk to me on my [tumblr](#) if u want, i promise i am very cool : ] oh also uh if you like manhunt!dream content from me, I have a [new fic](#)

up where manhunt!dream and dsmp!dream swap places lmao it's very funny i promise  
i am very funny in fact i am a comedic genius actually (/s) (please it's the middle of the  
night and I'm delirious don't take anything I say seriously)

## Chapter 5

### Chapter Notes

notice anything different? yea, this now has a total chapter number. it might change a bit but yea. because fuck, i'm gonna finish this, got it? i outlined this thing, i know where i'm doing, and i'm gonna get there. i wasn't sure before but now i'm determined. because y'all deserve it honestly fuck i love all of u sm u are my lifeblood

anyway this was highly entertaining for me to write so i hope you'll enjoy it too :)))  
ALSO I DID SAY IT WOULD TAKE LESS THAN 4 MONTHS SO  
TECHNICALLY I'M STILL FINE. fucking hell man

remember to sub if u enjoyed haha

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dream leaned on the railing, his arms folded, as he observed the stage below. Here, on the second floor, there were far less people as everyone wanted to be as close to the action as possible. Dream got the appeal, really, he did; there was a certain charm to the musty air, filled with sweat and alcohol, the electric buzzing that filled every crevice—it sent tingles down every nerve. And maybe if he was drunk enough, he'd also take part in the cheering and the booing as the fighters ripped each other apart. Well, metaphorically speaking. Sometimes.

But as it stood, Dream didn't feel like getting too into it. Instead, he only absentmindedly watched the loud crowd, bundled around the large pit like herrings in a barrel. You could find everything you looked for in a place like this. Someone was glued onto someone else, maybe even two at the same time. Someone was spilling their drink on someone, and the guards had yet another fight to break apart. Someone was getting someone high. Someone was proposing to someone. Dream blinked at the last one before shrugging. To each their own. They even got a cheer. Good for them.

But no matter what the audience got up to, the main focus of the night was on the two fighters. Dream couldn't remember their names, but they looked vaguely familiar. Regulars, probably. Based on how much coin was being thrown around on bets, popular, too. Gods, these places were a *goldmine*. Definitely less legal, but, hey, what was illegal depended on how much money you had. Some things just had a higher price.

Dream would know. How else could *hunting people* be a legitimate occupation?

At least here no one cared. No, if Dream could depend on anything in this town, was that he'd never be bored and that no one would bat an eye at him, far too engaged in whatever was the craze of the hour.

“Thinkin’ of having a go?”

Dream jolted out of his thoughts, whipping to the side to meet the face of a far-too-familiar piglin hybrid.

“Techno!” he exhaled a breathy laugh in surprise. “I didn’t expect to see you here!..”

In more ways than one—there weren't many people that could sneak up on Dream, and, though he usually wasn't happy about it, Techno was... an exception in a lot of regards.

(Dream was already grinning.)

"I literally own this place," Techno remarked in that drawl of his.

"Right, yeah, but, to be fair, you own a lot of places."

Techno hummed, nodding. "That's true, that's true," he murmured as he stepped next to Dream, also folding his arms on the railing. He was in his more casual wear, nothing fancy, probably in an attempt to attract less attention. As if that'd work with *Technoblade*. "Best investment of my life, really. I'm not doing anythin' and I'm getting richer by the second. Absolutely incredible."

"Yeah, I can see," Dream laughed, quietly readjusting his stance. He could never understand how Techno managed to be so effortlessly regal by just *standing there*. And in a fight club of all places. "But I'm still guessing there has to be some, I dunno, behind the scenes work?"

"Eh." Techno shrugged. "My name does all the work by now. And my goons. Can't forget about my goons."

Right, Techno's infamous *goons*. You never saw them, but they were everywhere. Swaying opinions, dropping coin into the right pocket, chasing out any "non-believers"—whatever the hell *that* was about—and generally being a menace to society. You knew you entered Technoblade's territory when the air changed and the taste of iron settled on your tongue. Red eyes would follow you and at times you'd think you heard chanting during the night, but it would always quiet down before you'd get too suspicious.

Sometimes, it was downright scary. Dream would hate to be on Techno's bad side. Or his *goons*'. Those two didn't always align. Somehow.

"So you do... what? These days, I mean," Dream said, clearing his throat. He hoped it didn't come across as awkward.

"I lay back and watch the money flow, Dream," Techno chuckled, leaning away from the railing, a grin tugging at his lips. A beat later, he settled back, resting his head in his palm. He shrugged. "I have a farm now," he said after a pause. It sounded more like a question.

"A farm?" Dream couldn't contain the surprised laugh. "What, did you retire or something?"

"Don't laugh at me, I can have other interests besides violence," Techno grumbled. "And it's relaxin'. You should try it sometime."

"Mhm right, why don't I just settle down and grow some carrots, I'm sure nothing will go wrong," he dragged.

Techno huffed. "Potatoes are a much superior option, Dream. Though if you surpass me, I *will* have to kill you. I don't make the rules."

"Don't worry, I don't think farming is my calling," he chuckled. "But, seriously, you've taken a seat back?"

"Eh, there aren't really any challenges left," he said, though there was an odd glint in those red eyes of his. Dream didn't comment on it.

“No challenges, you say,” he hummed, sliding closer, the grin evident in his voice.

Techno sighed. “I’m not fightin’ you, Dream.”

“Oh c’mon, why not?” he whined.

“Because you get too into it and *I* get too into it, and, frankly, I don’t want a repeat of last time.”

“That was *nothing*, I seriously was—”

“You were unconscious for, like, two days!” Techno proclaimed, his voice going up, as he threw his arms out. “What do you *mean* ‘nothin’?”

Okay, he got him there, *but*.

Dream hung his mouth open in silence for a good five seconds, thinking of what to say, while Techno stared at him, unimpressed.

“...Alright, but I got better.”

Techno exhaled a long, deep sigh, before turning back to the railing.

“No, seriously, I did!” Dream insisted. “We fought so long ago! And I didn’t die, so what does it even matter?”

“I doubt even death would stop you,” Techno grumbled. “If you’re so itchin’ for a fight, there’s a pit right there.”

Dream deflated. “It’s not the same,” he muttered.

Techno side-eyed him but said nothing.

For a while, they stayed like that, Dream sulking while Techno’s gaze roamed the area below. Occasionally, someone would cheer at him, and Techno would send a lazy wave back. That would only make the cheering louder, but he didn’t seem to mind. He looked... lost, in his own world.

Techno thought more than he talked, and, at first, that was what gave him the advantage. Silent and deadly, that was his whole schtick. You’d never see him coming, and when you did, you’d already have a sword sticking out of your chest. Now, though, when his presence was bigger than life itself, people actively looked out for him. Wary and paranoid of the infamous *Blood God*. It didn’t take long for him to gain a loyal following and establish himself as the area’s underground leader. Everyone that wasn’t on his side either learned to be quiet or fled. Or, well, disappeared without a whisper.

Sometimes, Dream still couldn’t believe he could just... chat with Techno so casually.

It did take a long while to get there, though.

(He still shivered when he remembered their first meeting. Oh, that’d *hurt*.)

“I’m not *only* farmin’,” Techno finally spoke up, his eyes still on the audience. “As great as these places are, I can do better.”

“Yeah?” Dream encouraged.

“This right here?” He gestured towards the arena. “It gets repetitive. Boring. I need to think about

audience retention, Dream. They're fine for now, but soon, they'll demand more."

"People are like that," Dream said with a chuckle. "They want a bigger and bigger show."

Techno nodded. "Exactly. And I've been *plannin'*, Dream, I've got big plans. A tournament, with larger, different arenas, teams, solo, better equipment, huge prizes—it'd be a show unlike anything else. A proper bloodbath!" Techno proclaimed with a grin, gesturing around, with each word the enthusiasm in his voice growing. "Fighters from all around the world will wanna be there. The audience will go crazy. And, most importantly, it'll make me insanely rich. It's perfect."

Dream didn't doubt it—when Techno set his mind on something, there was no stopping him. He could already imagine it; the excitement thick in the air, the roars, the arena painted in red, and Techno above it all in his signature regalia, inviting chaos like the god among humans he was.

Even if it was just an idea, an image based on a few words, it was already making Dream's blood sing. Oh, he'd *have* to find an opportunity to check it out.

"That sounds awesome," Dream said, grinning.

"It will be. But there's one problem." Techno's voice dropped, a frown darkening his face. "*Dante*."

Dream cocked his head at him. "The weird demon dude with that scientist?"

The look Techno gave him would have killed a lesser man.

"I can't even begin to explain how wrong you are," he spoke so slowly Dream thought it was actually causing him pain. Should he apologize or something? "First, that's *Mephistopheles*. And second, no, a dead poet isn't who stands between me and vast sums of money." He took a breath to steady himself. It looked almost comical. "No, Dante is the new *mayor*. And, you know what, you're right, he *is* a demon. An absolute menace. He's made it his life's goal to be my personal headache."

"A mayor that's not in Technoblade's favor? How did *that* happen?" Dream asked, and, though his tone was light, he was genuinely surprised. It wasn't common to hear someone opposed to Techno dare step into his territory.

Techno leaned in closer as if to share a deep secret. "He bought off the government," he proclaimed, his voice so low and foreboding Dream almost laughed. "Can you imagine that, Dream? Bribin' your way to the top? Couldn't be me, *couldn't* be me."

"No, you're very honourable," Dream said through bubbling giggles.

"Exactly! I'm the most honorable and least shady guy I've ever met," he stated. "But anyway. Let's say, hypothetically, I was busy with... other activities—" He rolled his wrist, "to overlook the latest elections. I'd thought, *foolishly*, my goons would take care of it. But no, they were busy being, get this, Dream, *amused* by Dante to realize he's a threat," he said, glaring at a passing guard, and the poor man, sensing his end could be near, scampered away. "So, before I knew it, the guy became mayor by supposedly a landslide. Absolutely unbelievable. You take *one* vacation in your life, and suddenly you're on the hunt list, again. I'm in shambles, Dream, in *shambles*."

"Yeah, you definitely look like it," Dream dragged, quirked his brow.

"But that's not all," Techno continued, ignoring Dream's quip. "The guy, this *nobody*, started raidin' and shuttin' down my clubs, my bars, even my one home for the elderly. I mean, what kind of demon does that? You wouldn't believe how hard it is to start up bars in this economy," he



exhaled a dramatic sigh, shaking his head.

Dream's sputtered in surprise, "Wait, you have a *what*—"

"That's besides the point, Dream." Techno waved away at his bafflement. "*Point* is, he's closin' down everyone's places, but, most importantly, mine. Dante thinks he can just come into *my* town, wreck *my* business, hunt down *my* goons, and get away with it?" His eyes darkened, bleeding into a deep red. Dream, not for the first time, was reminded where his title had actually come from. "This is *my* territory, Dream. What do you think happens to those that decide to trample over it?"

"Uh, not good things, I'd imagine."

"I'll make him *beg* for a swift death," Techno sneered, and Dream had never before believed anything this wholly. In that moment, he didn't doubt for a second Techno could overthrow entire governments if he so wished, and wondered if the world knew how lucky it was Techno's ambitions weren't that high yet. Once again, *thank gods Dream was on the right side.*

A moment later, though, Techno blinked and his eyes lightened. He leaned back, the tension easing, and Dream could have sworn he felt the entire room breathe a collective sigh. "That wouldn't be good for my image, though," Techno said, shrugging. "I try to avoid killin' 'democratically elected'—" He made air quotes. "officials. Bad for business. You see my issue now?"

"Right, yeah, but can't you get rid of him... some way else?" Dream wondered. "Like, I dunno, blackmail or something?"

"I've tried, the guy's got *nothin'* on him. It's as if he'd literally come from nowhere," he huffed. "I'd bet at least a quarter— no, a *third* of my riches that this is all just an elaborate scheme to chase me out. As if anyone could chase out Technoblade."

"Alright, so what's your plan?" Dream shifted so the railing would be against his back, his elbows propped up beside him.

Techno glanced around, as if anyone here would dare snitch, and leaned in, palm besides his mouth. "I'm gonna start an uprisin'," he stage-whispered.

It indeed was never boring in Techno's town.

"Ooh, that sounds like fun."

"Hey, if the people are unhappy with their government, I can't stop 'em," he said, shrugging. "I'd even say they're more upset about it than I am. If they can't fight and get drunk, what are they supposed to do? Be productive? *These* people?" He scoffed with a shake of his head. "Not in a million years, Dream, not in a million years."

And yet, the place continued to thrive, attracting more and more inhabitants. There were even whispers going around about an expansion. It was fascinating, really, from an outsider's perspective.

"Okay, let's say the people revolt," Dream hummed. "I'm not one for politics or whatever, but can't Dante just call for reinforcements? Especially if, as you said, someone up top wants him here? Not that I underestimate you or your goons," he quickly added, waving his hand. "Definitely not, but, y'know. Won't the rest of the 'government' be unhappy with your little revolution?"

"Dream, Dream," Techno started as if he was about to give another lecture. Knowing him, that was

likely. “Not every battle is won through blood. The art of war is a delicate one, and you must possess a mastery of high level if you wish to stand victorious in the end.” He paused—for dramatic effect. “But your concern is still valid. As great as I am, I can’t fight off an entire army, so this... moderately-sized coup has to stay within these borders,” he said, gesturing around. “Dante has many goons, almost as many as I have, but they won’t be a problem. While my people deal with them, we’ll break into Dante’s estate and handle him there. With most of his goons on the front lines, it’ll be child’s play.”

Sometimes, Dream wondered why Techno decided to stay in his town for so long instead of setting his sights somewhere bigger. He definitely had the skills for it, and the charisma, too. If this was how he talked about his plans to *Dream*, he could only imagine how he must sound when addressing his cul— *er*, people.

Then, his mind screeched to a halt.

“W-Wait, *we*?” he stammered.

A lazy grin stretched across Techno’s mouth as he interlinked his hands and propped an elbow on the railing. “Dream, my friend, my pal,” he started, and Dream wanted to groan at the cheery tone. He could already tell he wasn’t getting out of this even if he wanted to. “Have I ever told you how much I appreciate you? Because I do. Big fan, actually. Our bond? Unshakeable. Absolute steel.” He tilted his head at him. “You don’t mind helpin’ an old friend out, right?”

Sometimes, he still couldn’t understand how Techno managed to be so ridiculous so easily. Nothing that came out of his mouth was ever straightforward or serious, and, sometimes, Dream wondered what would have happened if Techno had gone into entertainment instead of... whatever this was. He could be a proper joker, honestly. A real comedian.

But, hey. Not like anything would make Dream refuse.

It was *Technoblade*.

“Alright,” he sighed, turning his head to look into the crowd. “Sure, I could use the distraction.”

“Knew I could count on ya,” Techno chuckled, straightening. “You couldn’t have walked in here at a better time, Dream, seriously. When this is all over, I’ll treat you for a drink.”

Dream side-eyed him with a non-committal sound, glad the mask obscured his scrutinizing look. He sure could be a charmer when he wanted something, and, for a brief moment, Dream wondered how open about his intentions Techno actually was. Still, he decided not to comment. If Techno needed something more from Dream, then, well. He’d be happy to oblige.

And, besides, even if he’d wanted to say anything, his attention was caught by something else as his wandering eyes surfed the audience.

With a quiet yelp, he dropped to the ground, crouching below the railing as much as his body would allow, heart already in his throat.

Oh, this was just *great*.

“How the *hell* do they keep finding me?!” he hissed, though it sounded more like a whine. “It’s ridiculous. It’s ridiculous!”

Techno continued leaning on the handholds, unperturbed, and raised a brow at him. “Weren’t you supposed to be good or somethin’?”

"I am!" he snapped. "They just— I don't know what the fuck's their problem been lately, I can't shake them off, and I actually *try*."

"Mhm. Sounds to me like you got bad," Techno remarked with a low chuckle. He looked out into the crowd. "Or they got good. Which ones are they?"

"By the entrance," Dream grumbled. "The ones that just got here."

Techno hummed. "Want me to get rid of them?"

"No!" Dream blurted far too quickly and far too loudly, as if trying to out-yell the sudden thundering in his ears. Techno cast him a questioning gaze, making him stutter, "I-I mean, no, it's — I'm fine, they're fine, they'd— they'd only send someone else, and that's always so annoying, so, it's— It's fine, just leave it, I can deal with it. Yeah, I'm— Yeah."

Dream winced at how awkward that was.

He could have played it cool and told Techno he didn't need to bother, but, *of course*, his mind short-circuited at Techno's nonchalant proposal. It didn't help that his heart had already been in a frenzy, so, really, he couldn't be blamed.

...Having Techno and his hunters in the same room was, frankly, less than ideal.

Techno stared at him for a long, long second before shrugging. "Suit yourself." He looked back into the crowd, his eyes narrowing. "But I kinda do need your full attention if I want my plan to work. And they seem persistent."

"Then, uh—" *Shit*, what could he say? He absolutely could *not* give Techno any unsavoury ideas that his head was already no doubt full with. Maybe if it'd been any earlier, maybe if it'd been with any other group, he wouldn't mind, but as it stood, he had to keep Techno away from them, *he had to keep Techno away from hi*— "Distract them? Isn't that what this place is for?"

"Mhm, that's true, you have a point there," Techno agreed, nodding. He snapped his fingers at a nearby guard, the guy scurrying over to his side in less than a second. Techno murmured something to him, too quiet for Dream to hear, and, with a nod, the man left them. "Good news, your schedule just got cleared."

"You didn't tell him to maim them or anything?" Dream asked, distrustful, trying to keep his voice cool.

"You think I'd resort to violence to get my way? *Me*? C'mon, Dream, I thought you knew me better than that."

"Techno. I'm serious."

He rolled his eyes. "Relax, they'll have a *great* time. No missing limbs or anythin'." He detached himself from the railing and started moving towards a nearby hall, beckoning at Dream to follow him. "Let's go, we have some more things to discuss in a more... private setting."

He could have taken Techno's word for it, really, but Dream couldn't help daring a look below. A couple of, what Dream guessed to be, goons attached themselves to the group, and even from afar he could see coin being passed, drinks pressed into free hands, pulling them closer to the action. Bad was trying to give the glass back, smiling in that awkward way of his and shaking his head; not that anyone listened. Sapnap, on the other hand, seemed more open to the idea, shrugging and downing whatever was given to him. And George was... distracted. He barely reacted to what was

happening around him, and only kept glancing around. His eyes went up, up, until Dream had to drop back down, heart racing.

Okay, well. It should be... fine.

And so, Dream, swallowing any remaining pride, crawled after Techno. Even if his lackeys were occupying the hunters' attention, he couldn't risk anything, not with Techno around. Gods knew how he'd react.

"The great Dream, ladies and gentlemen," Techno snickered at him.

"Oh *shut up*, " he grumbled.

*The things I do for you.*

~~~

That night, the streets lit up. Instead of fireworks and cheers, though, it was torches and chants bordering on screams. You'd think these people had been oppressed for years, only now breaking free of their chains, by how enthusiastically they stormed the opposition. But, no, they only wanted their... entertainment back. Well, bread and circuses, or something.

Dream didn't get to stick around the action for long, though. Right around the start, when Techno had performed one of his signature speeches— *okay*, maybe it wasn't all that surprising the people attacked with such vigor and bloodthirst—Techno pulled him away from the streets and towards the mansion on the main hill. The mayor's presumed residence. There, at the edge of town, the chaos was quieter, the shouts and weapons clashing more of a background noise. A fitting one, too, with how Dream's fingertips tingled with anticipation.

Dream perched in a nearby tree by the gates, watching as the mayor's lackey's scurried about, some out the mansion towards the town, and some inside, no doubt barricading. He waited until the area settled, as if the hill held a breath, before climbing back down to where Techno was crouched by some bushes, waiting.

"Four guards left by the entrance, the rest went inside," Dream said and he knelt next to him, keeping his voice low. "By how much security's been around, he has to be there."

"Much good that's gonna do him," Techno drawled, lips quirking into a half-grin. "It's been too long since I've had a good excuse to spill blood."

"Really?" Dream asked, surprised. "That's unexpected."

"I've been abstainin', Dream, been tryin' to change my ways."

"...And how was that going?"

"Pretty good, actually," he hummed. "A few weeks ago, I went to this farm fair and won first place in potatoes. Y'know, nothin' fancy, nothin' fancy," he said, shrugging, and though he sounded almost nonchalant, there was a barely hidden boast in his voice.

Dream puffed out a laugh. "How do you even win that?"

"Hard work and dedication, Dream, and lots and lots of farmin'." His eyes grew distant. "So much farmin'."

“No, I meant more, like— Nevermind,” he murmured, turning his gaze away from Techno and onto the gates. “So are we... doing something?”

“Huh?” Techno blinked, and he was back. There definitely must have been a lot of... farming. “Ah, right. Violence.” He got to his feet, unsheathing his sword. “Yup, let’s go do some.”

And with that, he headed for the gates, throwing them open without any effort. Grinning, Dream followed, his axe and shield at the ready.

*Finally.*

The poor guys at the door didn’t stand a chance, not when all bolts and arrows whizzed past Techno by a mile with how he danced around them, as if he could tell where they’d be before they were even loaded. With him up front, attracting all the attention, Dream barely had to try to get close, and, soon enough, metal on metal clashed. In a few seconds, red painted the porch, and Techno threw Dream a smirk before he kicked down the front entrance.

Though Dream liked working alone—no, really, he did—nothing could come close to this sort of excitement. It took hold of his every nerve when he could hatch through enemy after enemy without having to look over his shoulder, knowing *Technoblade* was right besides him, relieving everyone of their limbs and heads as it were an art form. Back to back, they covered each other’s blind spots as naturally as breathing, as if they’d been doing it for years.

Sure, Dream didn’t consider them as friends. But friendship wasn’t a requirement for trust. And there were very few people in the world he’d trust to keep him from getting maimed.

And, judging from the fact that Techno asked *him* of all people for help, well. It didn’t take a genius to connect two and two.

Dream found himself grinning at the thought.

The two swiftly progressed through the mansion, a trail of bodies and blood following them, until they reached the top floor, in front of the main office where Techno guessed his... political opponent should be residing. If the increasing number of guards was anything to go by, luck should be on their side.

Still, though, no matter how much they hacked and slashed, the waves had no end to them. And, honestly, they didn’t have all night.

“Go on, I’ll keep them off,” Dream called as he kicked a particularly annoying fellow to the chest, knocking him to the ground.

“I’ll make sure you’re remembered, Dream,” Techno proclaimed, saluting him, before barging in through the heavy doors, shutting them behind him.

Dream only rolled his eyes with a huff. Yeah, *wonder how you’d do that*. Maybe name a dog after him. That was probably as far as Techno would be willing to go for him.

Though Dream’s stamina was nothing to scoff at, he wasn’t sure how long he’d be able to keep this up. The guards kept coming with no end, and at one point Dream began musing whether this guy, Dante or whatever, didn’t have a secret clone machine somewhere in this place. Not that Dream would back off any time soon. He told Techno he’d guard his back, and he would. If he messed up, he’d get the sigh of disappointment, and Dream’s self-esteem wouldn’t survive the sigh of disappointment.

A few minutes passed, and, as Dream had just wrestled out his axe from a body, Techno came bolting out the doors. Dream didn't have any time to react before Techno latched onto his forearm and pulled him along as he sprinted down the corridor towards a large window, ignoring anyone that came at them.

Well, this couldn't be good.

"Techno, what—"

"Hope you have a god to pray to," Techno laughed, high-pitched and bundled with nerves. "'Cause you better start."

He let Dream go in favor of snatching a cabinet that stood some ways from the window, lifting and hurling it into the glass. A loud shatter rang through the hall, leaving behind a gaping hole into the garden, and Techno wasted no time in making a break for it.

Confusion raced through Dream's mind but he hadn't survived until now by asking questions. No, it was by acting first, thinking later, and right now, *yeah*, he got the memo.

Techno leapt through the broken window, and Dream followed close behind. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he wondered how the *fuck* were they supposed to survive this, something he probably should have figured out before he blindly jumped from the fourth floor. But, once again, *Techno*.

...That really was Dream's excuse for everything, huh.

Luckily for his fragile bones, Techno didn't, in fact, throw them into their deaths, as it became clear from the shimmering pool beneath them. Dream had enough time to react to land in the water with at least some grace instead of a sad plop. The impact still hurt, though, the rough contact and the dirty water aggravating his fresh wounds. Thank whatever gods were out there for adrenaline.

As Dream went under, a rumbling silence settled, one that both comforted and unsettled. For a brief moment, it was pitch black, nothing but him and the murkiness, but then the surface lit up.

Okay, that *really* couldn't be good.

Dream fought against the pull as he made his way up, his clothes and weapons trying their hardest to keep him down. Once he broke the surface, he gasped for the night's air, and the taste of... gunpowder?

The mansion before them was on fire. Or, whatever was left of it was, anyway. Around him, debris floated, some still falling down from the destroyed building. A sultriness tingled his senses, making Dream cough at the rancid air.

Holy *fuck* that'd been close. A second later, and he'd have had to face the god he didn't pray to.

"Well, guess that settles the witness question," Dream heard a drawl from next to him.

He snapped his head at Techno, or, as well as he could. "What the *hell* happened in there!?"

"Ah." Techno was silent for a moment. Then a moment more. "Dante is... an interestin' man."

Dream stared at him. "That doesn't answer my question, like, at all."

"I guess he really didn't like me," Techno murmured, looking up at the flames. Lit up like this,

with his pink hair floating around him, he *still* somehow looked sublime, despite the blood trickling down his forehead, ash settling on every wet surface. Unfair, honestly. Dream himself probably resembled a drenched cat. “Still, a bit overkill, if you ask me.”

“I thought— Did he seriously have his place *rigged*?”

“Truly... an interestin' man.”

Dream huffed. Clearly, Techno wasn't in the mood to elaborate. Not that Dream cared that much, anyway. “So, is he, what, dead now?”

“...I think so?” Techno hummed. “He did kind of... fall onto my blade before all this. Only a bit.”

“Only a— What happened to ‘I don't wanna kill officials?’”.

“Okay, first of all,” Techno started, slow. “I didn't do anythin'.”

“Yeah, he just— *fell onto your sword*. By accident.”

“As one does,” Techno affirmed, nodding. “And second, *completely* unrelated to anythin', how much do you like this country?”

Dream gave Techno a long look. Then, the mansion. Then, back at Techno.

He couldn't be serious.

Dream levelled Techno with a glare. “*No*.”

“I didn't even say anythin' yet.”

“No, Techno, you are *not* pinning the murder of your town's mayor on me,” Dream groaned. A chill wracked his body; with the adrenaline fading and his heart slowing, there wasn't much that could keep his body from freezing. Though his growing annoyance might help for a little bit.

“Okay, well, when you put it like *that*, it sounds pretty bad,” Techno chuckled in that awkward way of his.

Dream sputtered. “And how would *you* put it?”

“Well,” Techno dragged. He cast Dream a sheepish smile. “Helpin' a dear friend in his time of need?”

“Oh, fuck off,” Dream huffed as he started swimming towards shore. “I nearly died *helping* you. I seriously don't need a whole government after me on top of, *you know*.”

“Okay, fine, fine,” Techno said as he followed, though Dream could hear a grin in his voice. “It was worth a shot.”

“I like you, but not *that* much,” he grumbled.

“That's very flatterin', Dream, but I'm afraid my heart's been taken already.”

Dream spun around, choking on nothing, and was met with a quietly snickering Techno. “That's— *Actually* fuck off, that's *not* what I meant, and you know it.”

“Okay,” Techno drawled.

“Yes, okay, and besides, you have nothing on—”

Dream cut himself off there.

...*What the fuck.*

Techno raised a brow at him. “Nothing on...?”

Instead of answering him, Dream, very graciously, *mind you*, turned back towards the land and resumed his journey.

He did not want to be there anymore. Why was the shore still so far away? Why did the god he probably should have prayed to hate him so?

Techno didn’t push anymore, so for a while, the two swam in silence. Dream could appreciate that. The chilling water did wonders for his suddenly-heated-for-no-reason skin, and he could take all the time in the world to calm his racing heart. If he squinted, the atmosphere was almost nice.

Once on shore, Dream unlaced his boots to get the water out, cursing under his breath. Everything else, he could deal with, but wet feet? No way. Absolutely disgusting. Techno, on the other hand, seemed far less bothered, and he only wrung out his hair, staring absentmindedly at the fiery mansion. At this time of day and with the... *activities* in town, there was no chance of anyone coming to save the building. Maybe that was for the better. Dream wouldn’t know; Techno preferred to keep his top secret war plans or whatever to himself. Again, not that Dream cared.

“Well, I’d say this definitely calls for a drink to celebrate,” Techno finally spoke up, patting Dream on the shoulder. “And I know just the place for it.”

Dream rolled his eyes, though smiled regardless. “One of yours, I’m guessing?”

“Of course. Only the highest quality for my best friend.”

Dream laughed as he pulled on his second boot. “Oh, I’ve been upgraded?”

“A trial version, if you will. Perhaps permanent, if you—”

“Nope, no way. I’m fine with being ‘old friends’ or whatever,” Dream huffed as the two started making their way back towards the town.

“Fine,” Techno exhaled a long, dramatic sigh. He could be way over the top at times. “It wouldn’t even be that bad. I’d have it glossed over in a week, max.”

“In a week I could end up in jail, maimed, and dead, y’know.”

“Not if you got out of the country.”

“We’re in the fucking middle of it, Techno.”

“Okay, you have a point,” he murmured. “Well! I’ll work it out anyway.”

“Find someone else to blame?”

“Ah, you know me too well.”

The town was in celebration by the time they got back; the flames from the mayor’s mansion could be seen from far away, and word travelled quick. Again, you’d think they were cheering for the



defeat of a tyrant, but— Okay, knowing these people, Dante's fall was likely akin to that. Hey, Dream wasn't one to judge.

Techno led them through dark alleys, avoiding the lively streets as no doubt he'd be pulled into the whole charade if his goons saw him. As much as he liked attention, drenched and bloodied wasn't exactly the image of grandness. Dream would argue otherwise, at least in Techno's case, but, hey, no one ever asked for his opinion on these things.

Truly a wonder why.

The pub Techno picked out was a quiet one; the owner straightened immediately upon their entry, nodding, but Techno paid him no mind. He took the two of them towards the back of it, to a private lounging area, much fancier than Dream would expect in a place like this, what with all the mahogany furniture, the rugs, even a few paintings. After fiddling with the cold fireplace for a bit, Techno got it started, a gentle crackling now filling the room. With a content sigh, he sunk into a leather armchair next to it, resting his head back and closing his eyes.

When nothing else happened, Techno cracked a look at Dream. "You're gonna make me feel all awkward if you just keep standin' there."

"Ah, but I'm a bit..." Dream gestured to himself, the way the dripping from his clothes was gathering into small puddles around him.

Techno continued staring at him, deadpan. Then, he made a show of looking himself over. Then, back at Dream.

"Okay, I got it," Dream grumbled as he started making his way over to Techno. "It's your furniture that's getting ruined."

"Eh," Techno waved it off, shutting his eyes again. "I'll worry about it tomorrow. Right now, I just wanna relax."

Dream took a seat in front of him with a low table separating them, and melted at the warmth from the fire. Gods, he was *freezing*. He seriously needed a drink or two.

Good thing Techno owned the bar.

Soon enough, they were served a variety of drinks, types and brands Dream had never heard of, along with wooden boards filled with cheeses and meats. Dream was beginning to suspect Techno had this place for his own personal pleasure more than anything else.

Imagine being that rich. Ha.

"So," Techno started as he took a sip from his wineglass. There was an edge of awkwardness to it. "How's life?"

Dream couldn't help but laugh. "Techno, neither of us does small talk."

"First time for everythin'," he shrugged. "It's, ah, common courtesy to ask, I've heard."

"Yeah?" Dream brought up a piece of white cheese under his mask and bit into it. It was oddly sweet. "What do you wanna know?"

Techno stayed silent, twirling and watching the red spin in his glass. If Dream knew him any less, he'd think he was being nonchalant and cool. In reality, Techno did *not* do small talk.

He cleared his throat. "You, uh, still on the run, I see?"

"Not sure how *that* could have changed," Dream remarked with a huff, downing a shot of... something. It burned his throat right through his stomach, and he shivered. He probably should be asking what the hell any of this was, but, whatever. "You literally saw my hunters."

"True, true, makes sense," Techno murmured.

...This was getting painful.

"There's not much to say about me," Dream chuckled. "What you've got going on here is way more interesting. Seriously, Techno, tell me." He scooched a bit closer. "Are you planning on staying in this town or do you have your sights on anything bigger?"

Techno quirked a smile at that, and he started talking. True, there were rumors about an expansion, covering more cities, and they weren't entirely baseless. As the night went on and their drink reserves dwindled, the two grew more expressive. Techno indulged in all sorts of stories and fantasies, ranging from starting an empire to establishing a monopoly on potatoes. Dream found all his wild schemes highly amusing, chiming in with a few ideas of his own.

Frankly, he rarely let his mind go off track and imagine all the possible what-ifs, all the ways his life could have gone or still could if only the circumstances were different. It was nice, for once not having to worry about anything. To have some welcoming company to share a conversation. With how Dream had to live, he could visit Techno on very rare occasions, and times like these reminded him that he *could*. That there was someone in this cold world that wouldn't turn him away. The thought by itself was enough to make him giddy.

He liked being alone. But gods did it get lonely sometimes.

Dream exhaled a deep sigh, his head propped in his palm on the armrest, nibbling on a piece of red meat. The fire had warmed his clothes, and the alcohol heated his body. Lethargy settled deep within his bones, his vision swaying, and he got so hung up on the last thought. Lonely. Loneliness. He shouldn't be feeling lonely; that made no sense. He wanted to let that idea go, like the rest of the stream in his mind, but it clung to him like a wet leaf.

Lonely. He wasn't lonely. He had... *He had*... What did he have, again?

"You're talkin' to yourself, Dream," Techno's voice, mildly slurred, reached him through a fog.

Oh, he'd said that out loud. *Oops*.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "'s hard to think."

Techno hummed, leaning back into his armchair. Dream couldn't tell anymore on which glass he was. "What heartache's botherin' you?"

Dream laughed, mirthless. "*Heartache*. Mhm."

Techno stared. "Is it actually? I was makin' a joke."

"Oh."

They sat in silence for a few long beats.

"It's nothing," Dream muttered once his dazed mind caught up to him. "It's stupid."

It was difficult to tell what he was thinking about. There were a lot of images, though. And sensations. Oh, those were... He wanted to think about that. Wait, no, he *didn't* want to think about that. What?

He couldn't focus.

"I thought for someone on the move you wouldn't have feelin' problems," Techno chuckled.

Dream wrinkled his nose, reaching for another piece of meat. "'Feeling problems'? That's such a weird way to say it."

"I'm not hearin' any denial."

"Whatever," he grumbled. "Doesn't matter."

And it really, really didn't. Especially now. *Not* now. One of the two.

"It's just annoying," he heard himself say. "So annoying. Really! I don't get it."

Techno nodded, humming. As if he had any idea what Dream was talking about. "It can be like that sometimes." He took another swig of his wine. "Someone in some town caught your fancy? That'd be kinda funny."

Dream scoffed. "No, that'd be *easy* ." He reached for whatever bottle, refilling his glass. "Maybe I should try that instead. Y'know, get a fling or something. *Fuck* that's bitter," he cursed, face scrunching up as the scalding drink rushed down. For a moment, he considered the tingling aftertaste and poured in some more. It was just strong enough to distract him. Or not?

Techno was silent for too long. Then, a quirk of his lips. "Dream."

"Mhm."

"If you're implyin' what I think you're implyin', I'm gonna make fun of you so bad."

Dream jerked his glass in Techno's direction, barely not spilling anything, and pointed at him with his other hand for good measure. Like that, he stayed frozen for a good few seconds as his misty mind tried to form coherent thoughts. *Gods*, he couldn't remember how to think. And whether he had to. That seemed like too much effort. This whole thing seemed like too much effort, and the burning was actually *really* nice. Fuck cared, anyway.

"You know— You know what, Technoblade," he started, the slurred words leaving his mouth without any input from upstairs. "I'm honestly— I don't need your judgement, actually, because —" He raised his voice as Techno started snickering. "You know what? Yeah, you know what? I'm not— No, fuck you, I can do whatever the hell I *want*," he proclaimed, leaning so far out in his seat it was a wonder how he was still holding on. "Or I *would*, if he wasn't so— fucking— *stop laughing at me, asshole* ."

"Dream, this is—" Techno spoke through bubbles of laughter. He brought a hand to his mouth, trying to stifle it. "—genuinely the most hysterical thing I've ever heard. That's an impressive level of lonely, even for you."

"It's *so* not about that," Dream insisted. And it wasn't; really, it wasn't. Or maybe it was? Maybe it'd be better if it was? "And it's not like I'm even that— y'*know*. He's just so— The way he— You should see him going after me, it's like he *wants* me to— just— Ugh," Dream groaned, downing the foul spirit in one go. "And does he? Fuck if I know! Fuck if he knows, that's the

problem, I fucking bet.”

“You are a very sad man, Dream,” Techno chuckled, leaning his head against his propped up arm. “I’d say I’m sorry to hear that, but nah. This is hilarious.”

Dream jabbed a finger at him. “You... are the most unhelpful person, ever,” he scowled.

“What do you want *me* to say? You’re the clown. I’m just enjoyin’ the circus.”

“Everyone is against me,” Dream groaned, crossing his arms on the table and flopping his head in them. “What do I have to do for some sympathy around here?”

“Hm. Have you considered not being pathetic, perhaps?”

“You’re the worst,” he muttered.

No, scratch the whole camaraderie thing. Techno lived for the suffering of others. Dream had no friend in him.

He couldn’t decide whether his own suffering was the most important thing in the world or nothing could be more trivial. Somehow, it felt like both at the same time. He had so many problems and every single one could be solved if George stopped being so frustratingly stubborn. Yeah, that made sense. In fact, there wasn’t anything that made more sense. It was the only truth ever, and never before had he been this convinced of something. Goddamn him, really.

“Have you even talked to the guy?” Techno asked after an eternity, the palpable doubt making Dream scoff.

“I’ve done more than that, *actually*.” Dream lifted his head to scowl at him, and then remembered Techno couldn’t see it. One of the few inconveniences of having a mask. “For your information.”

Techno raised a brow at him. “Alright. What’s the problem, then?”

“The *problem*,” Dream started, trying to sit back up. Honestly, he couldn’t see what Techno didn’t get. It was so obvious. “is that he’s— he doesn’t fucking— I *think* we want the same thing, and I’m— and he acts like it, at least, but not— but only sometimes, right? And *somehow* I’m at fault for that? The fuck is his logic?”

Techno shrugged. “Well, his job *is* to bring you in. He probably thinks you’re just messin’ with his head.” He popped in a piece of red cheese, chewing on it slowly. “I’m not sure if that’d make you more pathetic or not, but this is definitely funnier.”

Dream paused. “I... hadn’t thought about that.”

“Clearly,” he drawled. “You’re welcome.”

Dream groaned, letting his head fall back down on the table. Okay, well, if *that* was the issue, then *maybe* George’s reluctance to be agreeable made sense. Maybe. What was Dream supposed to do about that, anyway? Cross his heart and hope to die? Did that expression even make sense in this case? He wasn’t drunk enough to tell. Or too much. Wait, no, there was something wrong there. He couldn’t be bothered to figure out what, though.

He couldn’t be bothered to do anything, and yet. He had *wants*.

Stupid head.

“So I just, what?” Dream mumbled. “Say I’m not?”

“Dream, if you want relationship advice, I’m the wrong person for that.”

“Oh, right, sure, let me just go to my other countless friends that I definitely have,” Dream huffed, waving his hand around.

“I’m... not sure what you tried to do here by admittin’ you are, indeed, hilariously lonely.”

Dream looked up at him, at his idiotically smug face, and really, *really* wanted to curse him out. “*Listen.*”

“I’m listenin’.”

“...Fuck off.”

“Okay, Dream.”

For once, he’d like to be on the other side. See how Techno would like it.

...The bastard probably wouldn’t care enough. Gods, Dream simply could not win.

“Y’know, at least I have something,” he muttered, leaning back in his seat. A memory from earlier resurfaced in the fog, something that’d made him pause even before. Curious, Dream cocked his head at him. “Which reminds me, what could *your* heart be taken by, anyway?”

“Vast sums of—”

“*Alright*, got it.”

Dream really, really could not win.

## Chapter End Notes

hypixel techno my Belovèd

this was just. an ode to rivalsduo. them. i thought "hey, manhunt!dream deserves a friend" so here we are. hope u liked the special guest appearance :)) it's not gonna be the last time haha ayup

lol i feel like i could do an entire spin-off on techno's (and dream's???hm??) adventures cause this was genuinely so fun lmao

i'd like to let y'all know that i seriously would have abandoned this if not of all of ur support, so /srs here for a moment, you are incredible <3 and hey you have yourselves to thank for this still being on-going lol

shameless self-promo time once again, if there are any endersmile enjoyers here, u might like my [other work](#)  
haha

[my tumblr!!!](#) come say hi owo



## Chapter 6

### Chapter Notes

FELLAS

look at the date. that's right. it's the anniversary of this fic babey

*how the fuck has it been a year what the fuck*

i am so good at this. i managed to get this chapter done in time. i am literally the best.

it's also the longest one yet. holy shit. i wrote so much. i am so good

LOL no but I genuinely thought I updated in September?? and you're telling me it was July?? bruh. well. I did say it might take a while el oh el

BUT ANYWAY!! I cannot express how much all of you still reading this mean to me. like, this is genuinely dedicated to all of you. y'all are my main driving force like actually and I get so warm just thinking about it. hope u enjoy this one <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dream would say his memory was decent. Not perfect by any means, but not horrible, either. What he *would* say, though, was that he tended to get a bit... absent-minded. Sometimes stuff just left his brain, what could you do about that? Mild inconvenience at best. Yeah, maybe he did stumble into pillager territory that one time because immediately after checking the map he forgot about it. And maybe he'd had a few close calls because the fact that he was out of bolts conveniently slipped his mind whenever he entered a town. In the end, nothing too bad, and, most importantly, no one was ever around to witness these moments.

So, at least, Dream could act as dumbfounded as he wanted without fear of embarrassment as he stared at a golden letter inside his backpack, fitted snugly in between his bags of dried berries and rope. Now, last time he checked, he didn't have a mailbox, so receiving letters wasn't in his expectations, not that there would even be anyone to write them. Gold was also something he wasn't used to seeing, so the combination of the two was somewhat suspicious, to say the least.

For all he knew, it could explode the moment he touched it. That'd be such a stupidly elaborate bomb that he wouldn't even mind, honestly.

No, but, seriously. He never let anyone around his backpack, so there was no way someone could have slipped it in and he only noticed it *now*. But no matter how much he wracked his head, he couldn't remember putting it there himself, either. Again, he was absent-minded, not an actual amnesiac. Usually, he could remember things when he tried, especially something as out-of-place, so that couldn't be it.

Staring at it wouldn't uncover the mystery, so, curiosity getting the better of him, Dream took out the letter. It had a fancy red seal, not appropriate for its environment, and Dream's name in elegant cursive on the other side. So it *was* meant for him. That took care of any potential moral qualms, at least, and Dream carefully pried it open, shifting so the setting sun's rays would hit it better.

*'Dear Dream,*

*On behalf of the Nox Crew, we wish to remind you that you have yet to confirm your participation*

*in the upcoming annual Emcee Championship. Our administration always seeks to improve our event's experience and we understand trying circumstances may prevent participants from reaching us in time, so, as such, this year we have implemented a direct acceptance or denial system through these innovative letters for any potential participants that have missed the deadline. We kindly ask you to sign at the bottom if you wish to confirm your participation at your earliest convenience, preferably in the first hour upon receiving this letter. If you wish to decline, you may leave it blank.*

*We hope that this new measure will help ensure no potential participants that wish to take part in our event are omitted due to unpredictable factors. It may have also been the case that you have simply forgotten about it, which we will not shame you for but will urge you to not abstain from it in the future.*

*As a final reminder, the Emcee Championship is to take place on the fortnight from the delivery of this letter. Yes, the day you found this is the first day.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Nox Crew*

*P.S. Please refrain from mentioning the existence of this new system to anyone else. It is meant to be used only as a last measure to reach the participants and not as an alternative method for the standard confirmation procedure, which is no doubt how any other potential participants would interpret it as. We ask that you do not abuse this system, either. In the case of either of these scenarios, you shall be blacklisted. Yes, we will know. Yes, we know you forgot, Dream.'*

Okay, well. *Maybe* Dream could do well with some memory exercises, actually, because this was... embarrassing.

He'd completely forgotten he'd applied for that championship months ago. And that he was supposed to check in soon after. To be fair, he honestly hadn't thought he'd get accepted. It was such a long shot, considering the size and the demand and the—he got lightheaded just thinking about it—prize pool, but, apparently, they liked what he had to offer.

It was very nice of them to send this convenient reminder, but that still didn't explain how the *hell* they managed that. Innovative new system that delivered a letter straight to your fucking *backpack*? Dream didn't dabble in magic much, so it wasn't like he'd know how things like this could work, but still.

Maybe it had something to do with that blood sample he gave back when he applied.

He probably should have been more concerned about that part, actually.

Well, in any case, *yeah* he'd like to accept it. Not only would winning fix his money issues, but it'd also be fun as hell. Competitions weren't something he indulged in often, given his less than fortunate predicament, but they sure itched a particular spot whenever he did participate.

And so, after rummaging through his bag some more, he found his chipped pencil and scribbled down his name at the end of the letter where it indicated. His handwriting wasn't pretty to look at on its own, but against the elegant cursive it stood out like chicken scratch. He didn't have much time to linger on that, though, as the moment he lifted his pencil, the letter burst into bright blue flame. Dream yelped, flinching back, but, just as quickly as it came, the fire was gone along with the paper, leaving behind a slight whiff of charcoal.



Well, that was... one way to deliver it back.

Hopefully, he hadn't done something he wasn't supposed to and now the letter was gone forever. That wouldn't be surprising, honestly. He wasn't good with magic. And directions.

Time would tell.

Luckily, he at least remembered where the event was supposed to take place, purely because the city's name sounded funny to him. Moog. What a great name. It didn't take him much time to find it on his map, and, tracing to where he thought he was, it should take him just under two weeks to travel there on foot. That... was slightly freaky, too, how precise the letter's delivery was.

Those damn magicians. Pretty cool, though.

There still was the issue with his hunters, though. He hadn't seen them in a bit, which gave him hope, but if he wanted to have some fun without getting interrupted, he'd have to be extra careful on his trip. He wouldn't want a repeat of that one competition a while ago. He was pretty sure he'd gotten blacklisted after that, even though he was the victim in that situation. Bunch of inconsiderate pricks, honestly.

In any case, if he wanted to make it in time, he had to leave *now*. Hopefully, he wouldn't get followed. That would be awkward.

~

By the time he arrived at the place, there were only a couple of days left until the start of the event, and the swamp city was buzzing with excitement. From what he knew, the Emcee Championship was the main attraction in this part of the land, a feast not only for the locals but for people all around the continent. Clearly, the city thrived on the attention and didn't cheap out on decorations and entertainment all through the streets; from genuine fairy lights to exotic food vendors and fire shows, it was truly a festival of the year. With how bustling with people the roads were, no doubt the profits were insane, too.

And, of course, it wouldn't be a proper competition without overflowing betting halls. *That* was where the real money went, especially if there were any more well-known participants. Dream wouldn't call himself well-known per se, but he wasn't a nobody, either, what with his tendency to get into trouble. That last adventure with Technoblade didn't go unnoticed, too; both by his goons who were more than delighted to spread the word, and some officials, who made getting out of that country an actual nightmare.

Thank gods for the lack of international laws.

Anyway, back to the participants. That was one of the cons of arriving so late—Dream had no idea who the others were, and even less so what team he was on. It was mildly nerve-wracking, but exciting nonetheless. It'd been a while since he'd met any new people he could actually talk to.

Unlike the rest of the landmasses making up the city, there were no bridges connecting them with the island on which the championship was to take place. Instead, the flow of people was controlled through boats, a convenient way to ensure everyone had a ticket for the event, too. Dream seriously hoped he wouldn't need one of those, because otherwise, this whole trip would take a sour turn real fast. That'd be stupid, though. Nothing about a fee was mentioned in the terms and services. Not that Dream read it, but, still.

It was beginning to hit him that maybe he was a bit underprepared.

Even already, two days until the event, there was already a massive queue at the docks. The sun had begun tipping over the horizon by the time Dream had made his way over, and he couldn't suppress a surprised laugh at the sight of people actually setting up tents to camp through the night. How they managed to keep them from getting wet was anyone's guess. Swamp people, they just had a way with water.

Dream skipped the crowd and headed straight for the booths at the front, where a lanky guard was lounging against one of them, arms crossed, surveying the people with lazy eyes. Must not be expecting trouble this early on. Seeing Dream approach, he straightened.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"Hello, hi, yeah," Dream greeted, stopping in front of the man. "I was wondering if you could tell me where the participants should go? This line seems a bit long, y'know."

The man quirked a brow at him, surveying Dream up and down. "You didn't get your instructions?"

"Must've gotten lost in the mail," he chuckled awkwardly. "I'm kinda hard to reach."

"Ah, right, I see, you're one of those," the guard remarked with a hum. For the life of him, Dream couldn't read the guy, so he had no idea what he meant by that. "You need to head east along the shore—" he said as he motioned to the side. "—until you reach the Wayward point, and from there you'll know where to go."

"Great, thanks!"

It should be noted that Dream had no idea what the 'Wayward point' was, but was he going to ask about it? No.

'Go east' was plenty enough for directions.

Eventually, he managed to reach a smaller dock, a bit hidden by a cluster of trees, at the very outskirts of the city. By then, sunlight only vaguely lingered, and the area was engulfed in a light glow from a few small flames around the docks. Luckily, there were still a couple of people there, chatting as they tightened the boat's ropes. Dream waved at one of them, catching their attention, and a young woman approached him, muttering something under her breath.

"Yeah, what's your name?" she drawled as she took out a folder out of her bag and a pen from above her ear. Clearly, she wasn't happy with his timing.

"Dream."

She went down the paper with her pen, murmuring "D-D-D..." until she stopped and nodded. "Alright, got any proof of identification?"

He really should have read the terms and services better. "Uh, like what?"

"Like a letter of your acceptance, a reminder, anything of the sort," she said, rolling her wrist, her dark eyes unamused.

"Oh, well, uh, the only letter I got kinda... burst into flames," Dream offered lamely.

The woman stared at him.

Dream tried not to shift in place.

She opened her mouth to speak, but before she could tell him to kindly fuck off, the young man she'd been chatting with had finished his task and jogged up to them. The sight of him momentarily startled Dream, with how tall he was and how... unusual his skin looked, two-toned, not something he'd ever seen before. *Definitely* not human.

"Yeah, yeah, don't worry, that's Dream," he said, flashing a grin at him. "It's impossible to mistake that iconic mask for anyone else," he laughed. "Huge fan of your performance at the Blockle tournament, by the way, what a great show. Got really excited when I saw your name in the participants' list, though, I mean, I wasn't surprised, they always want—" His spiel got cut off by the woman smacking him over the head, making him yelp.

"Oh stop fanboying already," she scowled as he rubbed the sore spot with a grimace. "You do this with every participant, it's gotten really annoying."

"Not every," he muttered. "I can't help it, alright?" He glanced up at Dream with an apologetic smile. "Sorry, I get overexcited sometimes."

Dream chuckled at that, a weird sort of giddiness rising. "Don't worry, I'm... very flattered, honestly."

The guy grinned again, enthusiasm rolling off of him in waves, and he no doubt would have started rambling again if not for the woman declaring her shift was almost over so they best get a move on.

During the entire boat ride the guy, whose name was Ranboo, Dream quickly learnt, had all but glued to his side, gushing about the new arenas, previous championships and tournaments he'd attended, what his favorite plays were, and, finally, he drilled Dream all about his techniques and experiences. Dream, honestly, was happy to indulge him; it wasn't every day he'd get to talk to someone this excited to know more about him. He'd known there were people who were aware of him, but he'd never before actually met any of them. It was an interesting experience, a nice change of perspective. And, if he dared to admit it, it made him weirdly cheery.

Feeling cheeky, he let some of what Techno had told him about his plans for a new tournament slip, as if it were a big secret, and he took a lot of amusement in how the guy's eyes immediately lit up with raw excitement.

At the end of the trip, Dream decided Ranboo was a cool dude.

What could he say, he liked having someone's undivided attention.

Now, if he could *choose* that someone, it'd be an entirely different story.

On the island, he was sent towards the lodging area further away from the main buildings and areas. With how late it was, he'd need to wait until morning to officially sign in. He didn't mind, and he'd much rather rest first, anyway. The fact that the participants were offered free accommodation was nothing short of a godsent, and Dream took great joy in finally being able to sleep in an actual bed. It didn't even have any clumps. Applying for this championship was worth it solely for that, honestly.

~

During the day, the island came to life. Event organizers ran around the area, taking care of any finishing touches, while the participants mostly roamed the extravagant training grounds. Dream

eyed the area with its parkour courses and fighting circles like candy as he went around the island, trying to find the place where he needed to sign in. After a few directions, he finally entered a small hall a bit off to the side. There, at a lavish desk at the very end of it, the wall behind lined with large cabinets, he introduced himself. After finding his name on the list, the man looked somewhere to the side and called out, "Scott! Another survivalist!"

That caught the attention of a man chatting with someone who was taking notes by one of the further desks. He sent a few more words before approaching them, a polite smile on his strangely glittery face. Now, it was worth noting that the majority of people here dressed in ways Dream wasn't used to; from colorful robes, mixed-and-matched fabrics, to eye-catching jewelry, and the man coming over was no exception in that regard. Only, he also had striking blue hair, blackened arms with tiny crystals embedded into them, and eyes that were a bit too sharp, making Dream doubt if he was human.

Okay, so, yeah, magical things probably weren't unusual around these parts. Dream refused to believe this guy wasn't magical.

"Thanks, Matt, I'll take it from here," the man, Scott, nodded at the other, who promptly left. He turned his attention to Dream, never losing his smile. It had an odd relaxing effect to it. "Hi, Dream, I'm Scott, one of the event organizers. I'm responsible for the participants, so because we have no way of reaching you through mail, I'm going to walk you through some things now, alright?"

"Yeah, sure, nice to meet you," Dream greeted him, an awkward chuckle rising. "And yeah, uh, sorry about the whole... responding thing, it kinda got away from me. But the magic letter was cool! Freaked me out a little bit with the whole—" He made a vague motion with his hands. "—fire thing, but it looked really cool, yeah."

"Oh, neat, did you get burnt from that?" Scott asked, unhooking his notebook from a weird belt and getting his pen.

"No, no, it was fine, just unexpected."

Scott nodded, jotting it down. "And what color was the fire?"

"Uh, blue. Kinda like your hair, actually."

"That's great," Scott grinned at him from his notes. "Lucky you, this was a trial version, so it didn't go so well for everyone. Hopefully, that'll deter them from relying on it in the future. Gods know how expensive those letters are."

The way Scott told him catching on fire was a very real option made him think he didn't feel too apologetic about it.

"But anyway," he said, putting away his notebook. "I'm assuming you're not yet familiar with your team, right?" He started shuffling through some papers on the desk. "We usually inform the participants about that a few weeks in advance, but since we didn't have your address, today will have to do." He presented Dream with a sheet of paper. "These are all the participants divided into teams. Yours is the last one."

Dream's eyes immediately shot to the end of the list, leaving the rest for later. This felt less like an official declaration and more like a handy note for anyone around, especially with the few scribbles next to some names.

Once he went over the ones in his team, though, he choked on air.

“Uh, Scott?” he spoke through rising nervous laughter. “There’s, um...”

“Is there a problem?” Scott asked, and the way his voice sounded, so polite yet cutting, his smile unwavering apart from something at the corner of it, only made Dream’s nerves spike.

“Well, I don’t know! Maybe. Just that there’s, well— I’m in a bit of a predicament, y’know, since I have this whole bounty thing on me, as I’m pretty sure I mentioned,” he rambled, a stutter to his words. “So I’m just not— See, I’m not sure how well that’s gonna go if, uh... I’m teamed with one of them.”

“Oh, yes, we’re aware of that, Dream,” Scott said, smiling so sweetly it made Dream’s teeth hurt. “Emcee Championship is an event open to everyone, and the only things we take into consideration is skill level and popularity.”

“Yeah, no, I get that, not saying anything about it—” *He was definitely saying something about it, what the fuck was in those terms and conditions?* “—just the fact that I’m, y’know, teamed with one of them. That, uh, seems a bit counterproductive?..”

It was the only explanation he could use without jeopardizing himself. In truth, he just wasn’t... mentally prepared for what this no doubt could lead to. Being on a team with someone tended to involve, well, talking. And it wasn’t like he didn’t want to. No, seriously, he’d spent the last few weeks thinking about it, about what he’d want to do and say if he got the right opportunity. From an outsider’s perspective, this was exactly that, but *damn* did Dream still didn’t feel ready.

Jitters ran across his skin from the mere thought.

“You’d be surprised how often we team hunters with their huntees, actually,” Scott remarked. His amusement at the situation was thinly-veiled. Dream was beginning to suspect this guy wasn’t as good-natured as he first appeared. “It provides for great entertainment, and the people love it.” *Yeah, no-fucking-doubt.* “If you worry about anything physical, though, don’t. On this island, no laws besides our own apply. Participants are not allowed to attack one another outside the designated arenas, and any that do so will be removed from the event immediately.”

“That’s great, yeah, thanks,” Dream muttered, looking back at the list. After a moment, he groaned. “*Two* of them? Seriously?”

“The third one didn’t apply.”

“Awesome, yeah,” Dream drawled. “Incredible, actually.”

“If any participants are dissatisfied with their team, they’re free to express their concerns at least two weeks in advance,” Scott said, shrugging. “Which you didn’t. The hunter on your team, George, if I recall, didn’t express any either, so here we are.”

Well, in that case, Dream can safely say this situation was both of their fault.

In Dream’s defence, not for a second did he consider that his hunters could also apply for this event. He’d never before seen them at any of the other tournament’s he’d participated in; though, to be fair, those were much more underground and usually had a ban on hunters or anything related.

But still. This was... Well, ‘unexpected’ was putting it too mildly.

...Thinking about it, wouldn’t they be in the same situation letter-wise as him? Would hunters and

huntess *ever* be in a situation to ‘express concerns’ about their teams?

As on-the-surface as this event was, there sure was a lot going on underneath it.

“If you don’t have any more questions about your team, have this,” Scott said, pulling Dream out of his thoughts, as he withdrew from one of those cabinets behind him, presenting him with two pink stripes of cloth. “One goes around your right arm, the other around your left leg. Be sure to keep them on throughout the entire event.”

After Dream tied the bands on, Scott proceeded to tell him more about what he should know. General rules, where to be and when, all that fun stuff. Once he was done, he let Dream go on his way with a crooked “good luck”, which Dream could only huff at. To be fair, though, at least these people could make tricky situations work in their favor. Unlike those other bastards that made such a fuss about his hunters tracking him down while in the middle of a competition.

It was just that ‘making it work’ came at the expense of Dream’s sanity.

Well. He could try making it work, too.

The fact that they’d have to play nice also sounded kinda funny, honestly, the more he thought about it. He could worry about other things later.

~

It didn’t take Dream long to find what he was looking for. As expected, both Sapnap and George were hanging around the various training areas, donning yellow and pink respectfully. They looked like they were resting, lounging on one of the benches, water bottles beside them, ignoring anyone else around them. Now, Dream could do the mature thing and stay away. And Dream was a pretty mature guy if you asked him. Maybe not an ideal role model for a young impressionable mind, but, hey, could be worse. On the other hand, though, when else would he get such an opportunity?

Maturity versus making the most of a stupid situation.

A grin pulled at his lips as he set his course.

Eventually, the two caught sight of him, and it was almost comical how quickly Sapnap’s face twisted into a scowl as he stood up, George slowly following, his expression carefully blank. Dream sent them a lazy wave, just for the hell of it. Sapnap huffed at that, crossing his arms, the picture of welcoming right there.

“Funny meeting you two here,” Dream greeted, cheerful, as he stopped some ways from them. “The world sure is small, huh?”

“Not sure what you’re so happy about,” Sapnap dragged. “We can’t do shit now, sure, but there’s only one way to get off this island. I think you’re smart enough to connect the dots.”

“And you have to be dumb enough to think that’ll work,” Dream quipped back, taking delight in how Sapnap bristled. “I gotta say, y’know, I’m impressed you’re able to be civil for this long, Sapnap. Maybe there is still hope for you.”

“You wanna know how civil I am?” he snapped, letting his arms fall and taking a step closer. “There’s an arena right there, bitch. You and me, now, let’s go. Or are you too fucking scared?”

Dream laughed, shaking his head. “The three of you *together* can’t take me down, what makes you think you alone could?”

That was kinda bullshit, even Dream had to admit. Sapnap was downright terrifying when he got into it, and in a pure one on one, it could turn deadly real fast. Not that Dream would ever admit it out loud.

“Let’s have a go if you’re so sure, then,” Sapnap said, voice dropped low, as he continued to invade Dream’s personal space, moving right up against him. “C’mon, what’s the problem? Don’t like that you wouldn’t be able to run away?”

Dream said nothing, only stared back at those burning with killing intent eyes. He really, *really* wanted to rise to the provocation. Not out of pride or anything, though, of course not. He’d just really like to go all out for once and knock Sapnap down a peg. He looked like he needed it.

“Sapnap, the guards are watching you,” George said as he took hold of Sapnap’s upper arm. This was the first time he’d spoken up, and Dream couldn’t help the way his pulse sped up. “There’ll be a time for this later.”

“The time could be right now if Dream wasn’t such a bitch,” Sapnap huffed, his eyes narrowed, but he still complied, putting some space between them.

“No need to rush, I look forward to meeting you in the arena,” Dream chuckled. “If you don’t get knocked out first.”

“What do you want, Dream?” George cut in, exasperated before Sapnap could respond. Their little confrontation was already attracting some curious eyes. Dream didn’t mind, honestly.

He shrugged. “Nothing, really, just wanted to say ‘hi’ to my teammate,” he giggled, showing off the band around his arm. “Look, George, we match!”

Just like him, George was also already wearing his color, and that made a weird giddiness rise. He had the fleeting thought that it suited them.

George rolled his eyes at him. “Yeah, fantastic,” he muttered.

Dream laughed at the expected reaction. “Well now, don’t sound *too* enthusiastic about it.”

“For the record, I only found out about that when we got here,” George said, frowning. “So don’t get any ideas.”

“That Scott guy definitely did it on purpose,” Sapnap huffed, crossing his arms. He narrowed his eyes at Dream. “You try anything, and I’m gonna make you *wish* you were dead.”

“Define ‘anything’, Sapnap.”

Sometimes, it was too easy.

“I’ll be fine,” George spoke up quickly, not giving Sapnap the chance to bite back. He was pointedly avoiding looking at Dream. He wished he didn’t. “I can handle myself, Sapnap, seriously.”

“I still wanna beat him up so he knows I’m not fucking around.” He threw a glare at Dream. “I just *really* don’t like it.”

“Y’know, Sapnap,” Dream said, a grin stretching. “You’re so passionate about it that it almost makes me think you’re jealous.”

It as such a dumb bait, the basic of the basics, and anyone more level-headed would never fall for it.

“Jealous of *what*.”

Of all things, he wouldn’t describe Sapnap as ‘level-headed’.

“Well, I don’t know, wanting to fight me solo, getting all up in my space, and now about who’s on my team.” Dream cocked his head at him. “If you want my undivided attention so badly, you can just ask, y’know. I don’t bite.” He leaned in a bit. “Unless you’d ask me to.”

The swing that came wasn’t a surprise, and it didn’t take much for Dream to avoid it. He fell back, wheezing, as George quickly latched onto Sapnap’s arm so he wouldn’t go for another one. The look on Sapnap’s face was downright murderous, and he looked ready to tear into Dream with his bare hands. In Dream’s defence, he didn’t expect the reaction to be *that* heated, but, to be fair, he’d already been on edge, so.

Was it his fault Sapnap made it so simple?

“We’re fine, we’re fine!” Dream called out to the approaching guards, waving at them. “Just some friendly banter!”

“I’ll fucking *show* you friendly banter,” Sapnap hissed at him, but begrudgingly backed down. “You’re so goddamn annoying, you know that?”

The guards slowed, though they still eyed Sapnap with suspicion. “You sure?” one of them asked.

“Yup, one hundred percent! Sorry about that, won’t happen again.”

“Well, keep it to the arenas,” he warned before casting Sapnap one last glare and moving back to his post, his friend behind him.

They sure weren’t kidding with the no-fighting thing.

“Gods, Sapnap, you really don’t know how to take a joke, huh?” He turned back to them, chuckling. “Loosen up a bit, seriously. You’re not my taste, anyway.”

“The fuck’s your problem?”

“I think you should leave, Dream,” George said, and the coldness in his voice made Dream pause.

Ah, he might have... done something wrong here.

A second too late, he shrugged. “Sure, I’ve got some stuff to do, anyway. See you two later, I guess.”

With that, as something uncomfortable twisted inside, he turned on his heel and strode off, not missing the surprise flash across Sapnap’s face. He murmured something to George, too quiet for Dream to pick up, and, soon enough, he was fully out of earshot, strolling through the various training grounds.

Okay, *maybe* Techno had a point. To Dream, his intentions seemed so obvious. Clearly, he was messing with Sapnap just for the hell of it, and who wouldn’t, really? Considering how he tended to react to provocation? He never meant anything by it. But, well, it was obvious in his *head*. Not everyone had his head (no one else did, actually, that was a stupid thought. That’d just be freaky.).



The idea stood, though.

It wasn't unreasonable to assume he'd be the only one who could see the difference in his intentions.

The question was, how could he make others see it, too?

~

Eventually, the time finally came for the participants to gather in preparation for the event's beginning. At the waiting hall, they were instructed to leave all their belongings in the enderchests presented to them. The fact that they had multiple spoke volumes of their wealth, more than anything else Dream had seen so far. If a tournament managed to afford one, it already signified importance and influence, and Dream had encountered only a few that could in his travels. So, even though it wasn't his first time using one, it was exciting nonetheless.

With how big the prize was for first place, this display wasn't surprising, honestly.

Slowly, as time ticked closer to the start, the participants began shifting through the large room into groups of four. Dream, too, spotted his respective color, slowly making his way over as he gauged his supposed teammates from afar. The three of them were already there; George, obviously, and two Dream hadn't seen before. To be fair, he hadn't seen a lot of people before, but sometimes he'd recognize a face or two from other tournaments, as few of them as he'd participated in. Familiarity always helped with the tingling of nerves he'd get whenever he had to interact with multiple people, but he could manage either way. Besides, meeting new people could prove to be fun.

One seemed livelier than the other, clearly excited to be here, and he was the first one to spot Dream approaching, too. He grinned at him and waved, Dream responding in kind.

"Hey! You're Dream, right?" he asked once Dream was close enough.

"Yup, one and only."

"Nice to meet you, man, I'm Alex, but you can call me Quackity," he said, extending a hand for a shake. Had to be from up north, then. It was an unusual greeting for these parts.

From up close, his teeth resembled a shark's.

"Yeah, you too," Dream said as he accepted the handshake.

"This your first time?"

"It is, though I've been at a few other tournaments here and there."

"Sam over here is a veteran." Quackity jabbed a thumb in the other guy's direction. "Though he's still shit at it."

Said guy rolled his eyes as he crossed his arms. "Let's see how well you do and then we'll talk."

Now, of the four of them, Quackity with his razor-sharp grin and black eyes looked like he'd break his bones the easiest. Sam, on the other hand, was like a goddamn tank, his bulky form hovering over the rest of them a good foot. With the mask and the goggles and the gloves Dream couldn't be sure, but the way his body was built, with angles that would have been wrong on anyone else, and the scales creeping up just above his mask, he had a suspicion this guy couldn't be fully human.

Dream didn't meet those often.

As Quackity shot something back, Dream's attention was drawn to George, who had yet to say anything. He didn't look like he wanted to, either; his arms were tightly crossed and he was surveying the rest of the room, not once glancing in Dream's direction. This lack of attention wasn't... surprising, though it did tingle the wrong way. He wanted George to look at him, to *actually* look at him, now that they were away from his friends, now that Dream didn't need to be as careful.

Techno's words kept ringing in his head, and, yeah, he had no one else to blame for this coldness.

Eventually, though, George's features twisted, and, quietly, he snapped, "What?"

Clearly, Dream's staring didn't go unnoticed. George still had his eyes trained somewhere else.

"You could at least pretend you're not dying to be anywhere else," Dream chuckled, hollow.

"Oh, and now you know what I'm thinking?"

"It's not hard to guess, honestly."

"Right," he muttered. "Then take the hint."

Dream let the uncomfortable silence hang between them for a bit. The chattering from all around was overwhelming.

"How did you two end up here, anyway?" finally, he asked. "I thought competitions weren't a hunter thing."

"Which part of 'take the hint' did you not understand?"

"George, we're literally on the same team. You can't just— not talk to me."

The glare that George sent him, his brow raised, was telling.

"Do you two know each other?"

Dream wouldn't admit he flinched at the voice. Of course, he'd completely forgotten there were others right there next to them. Both Quackity and Sam were looking at them curiously, making him grimace.

"Yes."

"No."

Dream exchanged glances with George. His eyes were hard as if challenging him.

Okay, well, now George was being more difficult than necessary.

Quackity looked between them, mildly amused. "Okay," he dragged, chuckling. "There's definitely something going on here, but think you could keep it to yourselves until the end?"

Dream shrugged. "Hey, I don't have any issues."

George rolled his eyes, but deflated anyway. "Yeah, sure."

"Awesome, thanks, guys."

The awkward tension in the air was palpable.

Sam sighed, "Of course Scott set me up with a pair again. I swear, this happens every year."

"Wait, what do you— Oooh," Quackity dragged out, and this time cast them a *highly* amused look.

"Right, yeah, I think I get it now. You're in one of those hunting whatever things?"

Was Dream the only one not aware this was apparently a well-established part of the event?

"Just leave it be, Quackity," Sam said, and he already sounded tired.

"No, no, that's hilarious, actually," Quackity cackled, glancing between them. "Which one of you is the bad guy?"

"Bad guy?" Dream echoed, confused, while George pointed at him, face blank. Dream sputtered at that, "Wh— How am *I* the bad guy?"

"How are you not?" George asked, dry. "Us hunting you is completely legitimate."

"Just because you *can* hunt people doesn't mean you *should*. That's kinda messed up, y'know."

"That's true, that's very true!" Quackity laughed, nodding. "You may be justified in the eyes of the law, but are you justified in the eyes of god?"

George just stared at him. "What?"

Luckily, a loud bell saved this conversation from going any more downhill. All of their attention was pulled to the end of the hall where a neatly dressed individual emerged from a set of large doors and announced the event was about to begin. Already, muffled cheering could be heard from further within, and Dream's heart rate picked up. He'd never participated in such a large tournament before, and the adrenaline was slowly kicking in. He couldn't *wait* to get out there.

At least he'd have something to keep his mind on.

Waiting for their turn at the entrance, Dream cast George a subtle glance. He was looking straight ahead, his expression unreadable.

"George—"

"Could you do me a favor and just... not?" he muttered before Dream could get another word out. "I have a lot of things to say to you, Dream, but now's seriously not the time and I'm seriously not in the mood. So just— back off, will you?"

Dream was silent, nothing but the murmuring of people around and the yelling from the stage beyond the doors filling the void between them.

"Alright," finally, he said.

Maybe it really was not the best time to do... what, exactly? Dream wasn't even sure of that himself. He tended to let his mouth run wild without considering any consequences, hoping it'd somehow work out in the end. Especially around George. It was always a bit difficult to think around him, to be fair.

Maybe the event would be a good distraction for the both of them.

~

This tournament, as Dream soon came to learn, was fucking *brutal*.

Sure, he'd heard stories about it here and there, but he hadn't before seen it for himself, and, wow, he was not disappointed.

No one had yet died, but only because at all times medics swarmed the outskirts of the arenas. And there were *many* arenas. Circular in shape, the walls reached for the sky as the stands were filled to the brim with a cheering, at times screaming audience. It didn't take long for the ground to get painted in red, and Dream was *living* for it.

Usually, the fights he'd participate in only involved that—fights. Which, don't get him wrong, Dream loved. Nothing could quite beat the thrill of hashing it out with just as bloodthirsty opponent until one of you was too beaten up to stand. But having actual variety to the challenges? Oh, now that was *fun*. Clearly not only for him, but for the people watching, too. He'd never before seen such a lively, loud, exhilarating audience, egging him on to try harder, move faster, climb higher. The arenas, too, had everything you could want: from ruins to navigate to colorful fires to avoid to vibrant enemies to fight. Each challenge was a surprise, and each was a welcomed one.

He had to give it to the organizers—they sure knew how to make a show.

And yet, for all that action and blood and chaos, his mind still refused to fully focus.

Sometimes, it wasn't as noticable. He could ignore the need to constantly look back, to make sure it was all fine, because he knew it was, he knew George could take care of himself, he always did. He could focus on making that leap, on securing his grip and pulling himself up over the obstacle, leaving everyone behind as they struggled with the course. Sometimes, though, his eyes would wander, and he'd hesitate before moving forward. It was a *parkour race*, not some fight, getting injured would take skill. *Well*, he winced as a cry came from somewhere behind, *maybe not for everyone*. Still, though, he knew his hunters, he knew they were good, all of them, so didn't worry too much.

It was weird, how different it was now. At what point he'd started lingering on it, he couldn't tell. At what point his thoughts had gotten so *loud*, he couldn't tell.

Whispers were easier to ignore when he couldn't afford to look back.

But then, there were times when he couldn't look away.

For one reason or the other.

There were a lot of skeletons roaming the large hall, the clinking of their bones mixing in with the ominous ticking of the huge clock in the center of the arena. He wasn't following George, really, he wasn't, he'd just noticed him passing a hallway Dream had been clearing. He'd been done with it, anyway, and he knew from experience confined spaces and fights could be nasty. But George had climbed atop a crumbled pillar before the skeleton-infested room, perched for cover, took aim, and started taking out the creatures with practiced precision, using the bow as if an extension of himself.

And Dream stood there, watching around the corner, unable to move ahead with his own task. He couldn't look away, not even when the last bones fell and George puffed a breath, glancing around, his eyes meeting Dream's by chance. And he didn't look away either, not for a bit, not until a growl

echoed right behind, and Dream twirled around, cleaving off the zombie's head before it had a chance to lunge. When he glanced back, George was gone, and Dream could continue cleaning the area without any distractions.

During break times, George always stayed a bit farther away from them, on an empty bench, not saying a word, just intently staring at his water bottle. Quackity tried to pull him back in, but besides a few non-committal responses, he didn't offer much, and eventually Quackity left him alone. The first few times, Dream only looked at him, opting to engage with his other teammates instead. They were a fun pair, all things considered, and made for good company. At the last break, though, after staring at him for a while, Dream broke away and made his way over. George didn't glance up at him as Dream took a seat next to him, though the way his body tensed didn't go unnoticed.

Dream stayed silent.

Eventually, George's shoulders relaxed, and, like this, quiet hung between them until the final game for the day was called.

Dream didn't miss the way George sneaked a look at him at the very end.

All in all, their team did alright in the first half of the event. Not fantastic, but not horrible, either. Sapnap's team, on the other hand, was dominating so far. Dream would catch Sapnap smirking at him at times at the end of a challenge from across the field, and the smug look on his face only worsened the itch for a fight. Unfortunately, most of the team-based games and, consequently, fights between participants were left for the second day, so he'd have to wait. In truth, it was a good thing—by the final game Dream's body was aching all over, even with the adrenaline coursing through. If he wanted to beat Sapnap, he'd need to be fully refreshed.

But also. The team-based games were left for the second day. Talking wasn't as important today, but tomorrow? Well.

Whatever they were playing here was tiring Dream out, honestly.

Once the event officially ended for the day and the participants began shuffling their way to the exit from the final arena, Dream stayed close behind George. He could see Sapnap already at the end, arms crossed and eyeing him with suspicion. Once they were out, Dream wouldn't get another chance to talk until tomorrow.

And so, discreetly, he gently tugged on the back of George's jacket, making him stop and glance over his shoulder. He lifted his brows at him, waiting.

Dream took a steadying breath. "I don't want to fight with you."

That visibly took George aback. He stared at him for a beat more in silence. "Where did that come from?"

"I just— don't want you to think that I do, y'know." He shifted on his feet, awkward. "Um. So could you, uh, talk to me tomorrow?"

The look that George gave him was weird. "Alright," he said, slowly.

"Cool, yeah," Dream said, nodding his head. He cleared his throat. "Thanks."

The corner of George's lips twitched upwards, but, just as quickly, it was gone. "See you later, Dream."

With that, he turned from him and continued walking to the exit, leaving Dream in the middle of the arena, staring like an idiot.

It was almost pathetic, how little it took for the pounding in his ears to grow loud enough to block out anything else.

There was something to be said about playing grounds.

~

The organizers had clearly left the best for last.

While the more individual-based games were fun, teams clashing was the real attraction. For good reason, too—all the participants had a decently high skill level and didn't go down easily, the differences in their fighting styles providing for a great challenge and entertainment.

Rested and refreshed, Dream was ready to take any of them on.

The best part, though, was that George kept his word. Dream didn't know why that seemed so important.

He still was guarded, preferring to chat with Quackity and Sam, but at least he wasn't outright ignoring Dream. He'd acknowledge him, would engage in strategizing before a game's start, and overall wouldn't avoid looking at him so much. Whether it was just so the team wouldn't absolutely bomb the event or what, Dream couldn't be sure, but he wasn't suffocating anymore in this weird tension, and, well. Maybe that was why he got confident. It'd never taken him much. Always the little things, building up until that was all you could see, and with George, it was nothing but little things.

During one of the bigger challenges, Survival Games, their team had gotten split up by two opposing sides, and they had no choice but to book it. It may have been by coincidence, or it may have been by design, but Dream got stuck with George as they hid in one of the decorative houses littered across the huge arena. They waited, quiet, for the other team to pass by, and Dream breathed a relieved sigh once they did. Their position wasn't great, and they couldn't afford to stay in one place for long, but his eyes drifted from the window and, well, self-control wasn't his forte.

"So, what *are* you doing here?"

George quietly groaned, not looking away from the outside view, "You're still on about that?"

"You didn't answer."

"I don't owe you an answer to every question."

"Y'know, you don't have to be so stubborn all the time," Dream said with a shrug. "Or mean, for that matter."

"I'm not mean. You're just annoying."

"Why am I annoying?"

Finally, George looked at him, weirded out. "What do you mean, 'why'? That's something I should ask you."

"No, I mean, why do you find me annoying?"

George was silent for a bit. His face was scrunched up, like he'd bitten into a lemon, not quite settling on a specific expression, until it evened out and he levelled Dream with a hard stare.

"Because you like to fuck with people," he said. "And it's exhausting."

Ah, there it was. The unwanted confirmation.

The way he said 'people' clearly implied something else.

Dream... wasn't sure what he should say. What would be the wrong thing and what would be the right. He wasn't sure, so he didn't say anything.

That, in and of itself, was saying something without him meaning to.

The heavy silence that settled between them as Dream tried to come up with ways to put his thoughts into words, that 'people' didn't apply to *him*, in a way that he would believe it, was interrupted by nearby shouting, bringing Dream back to reality. His head snapped to the cracked window, and he hissed out a curse once he saw a few green-colored people going through the nearby houses, quickly approaching theirs. Time was up.

"We should go," George muttered, separating himself from the wall and retreating back into the house where they knew a back exit was.

Dream tended to hesitate for too long. Eventually, it had to lead somewhere bitter.

The rest of the games didn't fare much better for them. Now, out of the two of them, Dream became the quiet one. He tried to pull himself back in, to focus on his opponents, on his swings and dashes, but his mind kept wandering, kept going over all the different scenarios and frustration that came with them. On the surface, it seemed so simple. So straightforward. The most obvious thing in the world. What could be easier than saying 'no, I'm not fucking with you'?

That wasn't where the issues came from.

For one, George had no reason to believe him. Even though Dream was fairly sure he'd want to. Dream had seen the looks he'd give him, the way his words had an edge to them that wasn't quite cutting, how he reacted when he let himself to. But Dream was, well, *Dream*. And Techno definitely had a point, of course it made sense for him to try to mess with any of his hunters in the hopes of making his job easier. Why would George think otherwise?

But also, with it came the question; if Dream wasn't messing with him, what was he doing?

Dream hadn't considered that beyond 'it just felt right'.

He acted more with his heart rather than his head. Clearly.

Sometimes, he didn't act at all, evident by the arrow that almost lodged into him. He flinched back, blinking away the haze, and George was standing there next to him, panting, his shield having deflected said arrow. He scowled at him and pushed him to a nearby pillar, making the two of them take cover.

"Gods, focus, you idiot," he snapped. "Aren't you supposed to be good at these things?"

Dream didn't say anything, just stared at him.

It had to be the first time George ever admitted to thinking Dream was 'good'.

Why that took him out so much, he... Well, maybe he *could* tell.

Huh.

George frowned at him for a moment more before huffing, "Whatever."

He turned to leave, seemingly not in the mood to stick around Dream even when the rest of their team had already been knocked off the elevated arena, but Dream latched onto his arm, making him pause.

"Do you have any cherry bombs?" he asked, not giving George the chance to protest.

He hesitated, but eventually blew out a puff of air. "Yeah, why?"

"Let's head up, c'mon," Dream said, gesturing towards a ladder near them with his head. He let go of George and swiftly made his way up, trusting that he would follow. He heard a sigh from below and the wood creaking, and he couldn't keep a satisfied smile from forming.

There were still quite a few people left around the platforms, and once Dream took the highest one, he had a better vantage point to scope out the area. With his head clearer, he could evaluate the situation better. They didn't stand a good chance fighting anyone head on, with half their team missing, so he instead decided to resort to other measures. He tugged George along as he maneuvered through the gaps, avoiding anything flying their way, until he spotted two teams clashing below one of the platforms. With the bombs that George had found in one of the loot chests, it wasn't difficult to take them by surprise.

They may have not scored a lot of points that round, but George didn't make an attempt to separate throughout the end of it, so Dream took that as his own small victory.

He always did perform better with his actions than words.

...Well, that was something he could work with.

For that, though, he needed to see through the event.

Before he knew it, Battle Box came up, the game he'd been most looking forward to. There was no way to avoid clashing with any specific team, and he'd been eyeing the yellow one for a while. All the rounds leading up to it only served as fuel for his adrenaline, and when he finally saw them on the other side, he couldn't help but grin.

"George," he called, seconds before the barrier was lifted. "Do yourself a favor and stay the opposite from me."

He grimaced. "Sapnap's not going to go easy on you."

"I sure hope not."

Quackity laughed, knowing, as he slapped Dream on the shoulder. "I'm rooting for you, man. Kick his ass!"

Dream pulled a grin at him. "I will."

With that, the barrier lifted, and the participants spilt into the enclosed area.

Arrows immediately flew, some shouts ringing through the arena, and everyone made their way towards the center. Dream dashed to the side path as his eyes followed Sapnap do the same. He



took cover around one of the walls, nudging in another bolt into his crossbow, and waited for any sign of the other. He peeked around, daring, and barely dodged the arrow that came at him. Chuckling, he quickly changed positions, and let his bolt fly the moment he noticed Sapnap leave his own cover. It lodged into the stone wall behind him, and two stared at each other for a split second, the need for violence thick in the air, before they dismissed their crossbows and went for the swords, lunging at each other.

Dream met Sapnap in the middle, their blades clashing with a loud clang. For a second, it was a fight of strength, seeing who'd back down first, but the next one he was taking a step back to avoid a swift strike for his head. Dream deflected the next blow with his sword, sending one of his own, but Sapnap wasn't backing down either. His teeth were bared, and his eyes were on fire, screaming for blood, and Dream couldn't help but respond in kind.

Once more, their swords clanged together, and like that, they stayed, trying to force the other to lose their grip.

Sapnap grinned at him, razor-edge sharp. "They give you a bonus for killing an opponent, did you know? Brutal bastards," he laughed, delighted by the idea. "We'd get to keep the body, too. Would barely make a difference, in the end. Sounds awfully appealing to me, honestly."

"I'm beginning to think you don't appreciate me," Dream huffed, putting more vigor into pushing Sapnap back.

He exhaled a labored breath, his eyes narrowing. "I'd appreciate you much more if you were *dead*."

With that, Sapnap quickly slid his sword to the side and got out of the hold, ducking to avoid the fall of Dream's blade. They continued to dance around each other like that, neither giving ground to the other, the rest of the world faraway. It was a battle of endurance, more than anything, and Dream wasn't about to lose it. Sapnap, though, was downright frenzied—he didn't give Dream a second to breathe, strikes coming at him with only a moment in between. Dream's whole focus was needed to keep any from landing, zoned in on his opponent in front.

So, really, it wasn't surprising that all it took was a single misstep. A wrong move, and hot pain ignited as Sapnap slashed through his shoulder. Pure adrenaline kept the scorching at bay enough for him to react in time to miss the second blow. Hissing, he went for more reckless attacks, forcing Sapnap to take a more defensive position. Like that, they hashed it out, until Dream managed to hook around Sapnap and trip him, making him plummet to the ground. He exhaled a pained groan, but before he could gather himself back up, Dream had the tip of his sword at his throat, effectively pinning him to the ground. He heaved, watching as Sapnap sent him murderous glares from below, though not daring to move.

"Well?" Sapnap snapped. "Are you just gonna stand there like a moron?"

Dream didn't respond. He didn't need to.

A second later, the bell signifying the end of the match rang, and Dream glanced over to see his team had succeeded in getting the flags. He let his shoulders drop at that, and slowly backed away from Sapnap. After a moment more, he turned away, and headed back to their designated platform.

Something told him Sapnap wouldn't let this go so easily.

*Good*, he thought, grinning. He'd look forward to it.

The rest of the game went relatively well, too. The medics patched up his shoulder enough for him to continue fighting without much of a hitch, and, soon enough, it came to an end. As it was the last game, it determined the finalists, and Sapnap's team was among them. Unsurprisingly. Dream wasn't too upset about the loss, honestly; while some money would have been incredible, this proved to be a very fun event, one he'd love to come back to again. But, that was only one of the reasons why he couldn't feel too bothered by their placement.

All the remaining participants gathered to watch the podium below as the finalists readied themselves for the final game. Dream, with his eyes trained on something else entirely, couldn't care less.

Their time here was over. Once the finals would end, and the winners would get crowned, that'd be that. In other words, after this, things would go back to how they were.

Only, he didn't want them to.

There was only one way to go.

Dream moved through the crowd until he was next to George, and the other looked at him, questioning. Dream gestured to the side with his head, and began walking away. After a moment, George followed. In silence, they navigated out of the loud arena and into the waiting hall, back to the enderchests. Dream went over to one and gathered his things, still without saying a word. George, despite looking wary, did the same. Once he had everything on him, he looked back at George, and took a hallway further into the building, away from the chaos and away from the outside. Once again, George followed.

The further in they went, the more muffled the sounds grew, and it became increasingly obvious this part of the building wasn't in use during the event. Their footsteps echoed softly off the shiny walls, and, for a moment, Dream let himself revel in the murmuring quiet. His heart was in his throat, both still from the last game and from what he was planning to do. He wouldn't back out of it, though. Enough was enough, and he had to get whatever was happening here sorted.

Even if it meant he might not make it out of it unscathed.

Eventually, Dream came across what looked to be like an indoor training room, with various weapons lining one of the walls, dummies strewn around, a few mats here and there. The setting sun through the windows illuminated the room in a gentle orange, providing it with enough light to make your way around. It was empty and enclosed, and that was all Dream could ask for. He went inside, gestured for George to go further in, and closed the door behind them, pulling up a chair against the handle. Even if everyone was busy, he didn't want to risk anything.

"Dream, what—"

"Fight me," Dream said, turning around to look at George. He stared at him in surprise, frowning, but Dream could see the way his shoulders tensed. Dream unsheathed his sword and slowly circled George until they were in the middle of the room, face to face. "Fight me like you mean it."

A few beats passed, and, slowly, George took out his own sword.

"What's the catch?" he asked.

"There's no catch," Dream said, shrugging. "Isn't that just what you're supposed to do?"

George considered it for a moment. It showed on his face, the way it twisted in thought before he placed himself into position.

"I guess so," he said, quietly.

The clash of metal was deafening in the silent room.

With Sapnap, there was a clear intent. To strike, to maim, to hurt. To draw blood, above everything else. Dream could still feel the stinging in his shoulder, even after the high grade regeneration potions. With George, there was none of that, and Dream could tell both of them could feel it. It wasn't hesitant per se, neither of them pulled their blows, but it wasn't as... bloodthirsty. As demanding. George's eyes didn't scream violence; they didn't scream anything, a carefully blank slate. It told Dream all he wanted to know.

He knew the mat was right there, but he didn't make an effort to avoid it. His feet caught on it, and he let himself crash down, his lungs momentarily losing air as his back hit the floor. The next second, George was on top of him, pinning him down to the ground with the blade angled across his neck, exhaling quick breaths.

Dream didn't move. George didn't either. And for a while, they laid still, letting time tick in the background.

George was the first to break out. His lips twitched, and he narrowed his eyes at Dream. "Why did you fall?" he asked.

"I tripped."

"No, you didn't. You don't 'trip'."

"Do you actually think that highly of me?"

It wasn't a taunt.

George didn't deign it with an answer.

"The event's over," Dream said, nonchalant. "No one's gonna care what the participants do to each other anymore."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"George, you have a sword at my throat," Dream chuckled. "Isn't there a reason for that?"

George's features were tight. His eyes roamed Dream's mask, as if it would tell him anything. His hand holding the handle was beginning to tremble from the awkward position.

"A dead bounty is only half the reward," he said, matter-of-fact. Or, almost.

"You don't have to *kill* me. You could easily maim me, make me lose consciousness, or whatever. I can't really do much from here."

Vaguely, he remembered Techno once asking him if he had a death wish, though it was more from amusement. It probably still would be.

George's jaw was so taunt it almost looked painful. He was slowly shaking his head, as if not fully taking in Dream's words. He shut his eyes for a moment, winced, and looked back down at Dream, still no clarity in them. He breathed out, "Why? Why would you do that?"

"Because you're not the only one who's tired, George," Dream said, his voice dropping lower. "If you really think I'm messing with you, and if you really don't want any part of it, then go for it. I

promise you, if you do, I'll never say another word to you."

He hoped the implications were clear. Even if George attacked him here, it wouldn't be the last time, Dream would make sure of it. But it *would* be the last time for everything else.

Maybe now, when it's at the most extreme and when it was less words, they could finally come to an agreement, whatever that might be.

George laughed, high-pitched and mirthless. Despite it, his eyes were wide, not leaving Dream's for a beat. "You're so— You are *so* overconfident. It's almost sickening, actually."

"Prove me wrong, then."

It sounded less like a challenge and more like a question. Dream wasn't sure what he had intended for it to sound.

When George didn't move, still as a wall, Dream slowly lifted his gloved hand up and wrapped it around where George's laid on the hilt of the sword. He didn't try to break out of it.

"George," he murmured, and he could see him tremble. "You're right, I do like to mess with people. Especially when they react like Sapnap, it's funny," he chuckled, soft, and George huffed at that. "But do you honestly think I'd go to these lengths?"

"I don't know," he said, quiet in turn. "Would you?"

"I think even for me that'd be a bit much," he laughed. "Seems kinda counterproductive." He paused, letting the air settle. "If I really am overconfident, and if you seriously don't feel the same way, then let me know *now*." Slightly, he tilted his head at him. "But I think we both know I have reason to be."

Dream carefully took hold of the handle, George putting up no resistance, and slid it out of his grasp, away from his throat. He let it clang on the ground next to them, useless.

He never cared much for the time of day, but sunsets looked different when they wrapped someone as pretty in that gentle glow. He reached out, giving George time to back away if he wanted to, and laid his hand on the side of his face when George didn't. His lashes fluttered, casting shadows on his cheeks, and Dream wondered how they'd feel.

"I didn't like it," George said, above a whisper, his eyes unfocused and his mouth barely moving. "When you said those things to Sapnap."

Dream couldn't keep down the endeared laughter that bubbled up at the proclamation. He traced the skin under his eye with his thumb, grinning. "Yeah? Would you have liked it if I'd said it to you instead?"

His gaze followed the way George's throat bobbed. "Maybe," he admitted. "If you meant it."

"If you want my undivided attention, George, just ask."

George hummed, observing him, before he leaned down, forcing Dream to reposition his hand to the back of his neck. He caressed the area where his hair began, dragging the rough leather across it, and drank up the shaky exhales that followed.

"How do I know that I can trust you?" he asked, and Dream barely caught the words.

“The same way I trusted you not to slit my throat,” he chuckled. “You think too much.”

“What am I supposed to do if not think?”

“I have a few ideas.”

“Really,” he said, and brought a hand to Dream’s face. He flicked the side of the mask. “They have their problems.”

The rush of blood in his ears was almost too overwhelming. Giddy with nerves, he giggled, “Oh, I know how to fix that.”

Dream let go of George and reached for the band still tied around his arm. With a few quick moves, he had it off, and George made a weird sound in his throat at that, his brows raised.

“You’re joking.”

“Pink looks good on you, y’know.” He was getting lightheaded. “Some more wouldn’t hurt.”

Whatever inner conflict that waged in George lasted for a good several seconds before he exhaled a long sigh, took the fabric, and leaned back up. Casting Dream another look that screamed *fuck you*, he brought it up to his eyes and slowly tied it around his head. It was just wide enough to cover them, and, well, Dream had been right. It *did* look good on him.

Heart pounding enough to make his ribs hurt, Dream followed suit and sat up, straddling George in his lap. With a trembling hand, he took hold of his mask and removed it, setting it on the floor besides them. The rush of air directly on his skin was unfamiliar, mildly uncomfortable, but all that was at the back of his head as he took hold of George’s face and let himself marvel at it for a moment. Marvel at how close it was, at how George melted into the touch, and, when he couldn’t handle it anymore, he closed the distance.

Though it wasn’t the first time, he still couldn’t help but be surprised at how warm it was. At how quickly it spread. He stayed still for a beat, just basking in it, until George grasped at his jacket and turned his head, moving against him. Happy to oblige, Dream followed suit, and the fluttering in his chest leaped right up to his throat. He caught the breaths George would exhale, and he would chase them, drinking it all up. It tasted like nothing and everything at the same time, too much for him to register, but he didn’t care. He couldn’t think, he could only act, act, and *act*. And George was responding the same, which was all the encouragement he needed.

Dream nipped at his lower lip, grinning momentarily at the mild shiver, and let one of his hands drop, all the way to George’s side, where he held him firmly and pulled in closer. In turn, George released his jacket and wrapped his arms around Dream’s neck, his fingers finding their place in his hair. He carded through them, rough, as if it was still too far away, and Dream grinned against his lips. George huffed at that and pushed deeper, twisting for a better angle. Dream didn’t remember him being this eager last time. To be fair, he’d just woken up, still out of it probably, unlike now. Now, Dream hoped, George knew better of what he was doing, of what he was getting into. Gods, he *hoped*.

For a moment, George pulled back, just barely, puffs of air leaving reddened lips. Dream kissed the corner of it, murmuring, “What?”

Instead of answering, George turned his head to where Dream’s hand still was and caught the leather between his teeth, pulling on it. “Off,” he muttered.

The shiver that racked his bones at that made him puff out an airy giggle. “Sure.”

Dream released him and made quick work of getting his gloves off. Once his hands were bare, a once again unfamiliar sensation, he laid one right under his jaw, caressing it with his thumb, while the other found his way back to George's side. Dream took delight in the hum that sounded in George's throat, the soft exhale, and, feeling daring, he found the hem of George's jacket and shirt and let his fingers slip underneath, grazing the surface.

"You like that?" he whispered, observing the way George's face twisted, fascinated.

He pulled Dream in closer. "You talk too much," he said against his lips, and that was all it took for them to be back where they started.

Like that, Dream wasn't sure how long they would have stayed for. Time had stilled, and he couldn't bring himself to start it back up. In the end, the shouts were what did it. They broke through the silence that had settled in the usually loud room, and, against his will, Dream was pulled back to Earth.

As much as he'd want to, he couldn't have George all to himself without end. Not right now, anyway. Not when there were hundreds of people outside, not when no doubt some of them would soon spill into the corridors. Sighing, he broke off, though still staying close.

"I think the finals are over," Dream said softly. "I wonder who won."

George groaned and hung his head on Dream's shoulder. "I don't know. I don't care. Sapnap, probably."

"Probably," he laughed. "He's pretty good."

"I guess."

A beat dropped. Then another. Some voices were getting louder.

"He'll probably be looking for you."

George hummed.

Dream smiled and turned to lay a kiss on the side of his head, whispering, "Truce?"

It was endearing, the way George huffed a breath, as if it were some stupid suggestion, yet lifted his head, paused, and slowly traced his hands from Dream's neck to his face. If it was possible, Dream's heart picked up. He froze. The contact was beyond unfamiliar; it was downright *scorching*. It made it hard to breathe, hard to think, yet he didn't dare to move away. Even with the blindfold, it felt almost like George could see him. The thought terrified him, but his hands were so warm, so unthreatening, so eager, that he couldn't help but let George keep them there.

George leaned in and pecked him, not entirely accurate, but heart-stopping nonetheless. Somehow, out of everything, *that* was the thing that made him stop breathing.

"For now," George said.

And, honestly, it was more than Dream could have asked for.

Grinning, he pulled him in again, to hell with anyone outside. He didn't know how long 'for now' lasted, but he had to make it count.

:)))

It had to come eventually lol. I think there was enough wait for it and i hope the wait was worth it el oh ellll

I'm not entirely happy with some of these parts but I just. really wanted to get it out today x)))

I think there is something to be said about how the two times they made out is on the same day lol

Can I just say the reception for the last chapter absolutely blew me away like. y'all really liked hypixel!techno huh:'DD there will be more of him in the future, so that's something to look forward to lol. I genuinely. like, *genuinely* really appreciate all of you. you all hold a very special place in my heart

also if I feel cheeky I might write this chapter from George's pov and post it separately somewhere cause man's had thoughts lmao it's kinda funny

here's my [tumblr](#) once again hey hey

(for the readers of both of my stories: to clarify, the worlds are similar, but they're not the same. so, some things work differently, like the MCC or the bounty system. it confuses even me at times ngl but it is what it is :'))

# Part 1

## Chapter Notes

Happy late Valentine's day!!! <33 and also happy birthday my beloved <3

Look, that wasn't such a bad wait, was it? I tried :>

This is actually the first time I'm doing a two-parter!! I usually try to wrap up a story(ish) in one chapter, but, for a few reasons, I'm gonna split this one up into two. The first one's a bit shorter than my usual, but the second part is gonna be... quite long haha. So be on the lookout!! Not too soon, though. I wouldn't be me otherwise <3 sorry

Have fun reading!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“This fucking sucks.”

“Language!” Bad chastised, throwing Sapnap a scowl over his shoulder from where he stood by the bars. “That sort of attitude will get us nowhere.”

“Don’t care, didn’t ask, this absolutely. Fucking. *Sucks*,” Sapnap dragged out each word as if a challenge. “Whose bright idea was to go to this place, again? Huh, Bad?”

“How was I supposed to know—”

“If you had listened to *me*, this wouldn’t have—”

George groaned, throwing his head back against the damp wall. “Oh my god, Sapnap, shut up. You’re so annoying.”

“*You* shut up, bitch,” Sapnap snapped, glaring at him from the opposite end of the cell. “Mr What’s-the-worst-that-can-happen. Literally suck my dick.”

“Ew, no, what’s wrong with you?”

“Quit it, both of you!” Bad whipped around to face them, frowning. “We need to think about this *calmly*, fighting isn’t gonna help us with anything!”

“It’s helping me feel better,” Sapnap muttered.

George huffed. “Oh, because everything’s all about you, isn’t it?”

Before Sapnap could go ahead and retort, a record scratch and freeze frame was in order.

Yeah, this was... a situation.

Personally, George had never been in prison. Not that he hadn’t done things that’d land him a place. More that they all could get away with far more things than anyone not in the hunting business. Speaking of, actually, their occupation was incredibly bizarre, when you thought about it.



No, really, in any other world, this just couldn't be legal. Or, maybe it was, and in every world, there was a George, a Sapnap, and a Bad that all did the same thing to varying degrees of success, and maybe that was simply fate. Still, though, George didn't know all these other worlds, and, frankly, he didn't care. This one was fucking weird.

For a variety of reasons.

But, right, their occupation.

On paper, it sounded legitimate. There were the boring parts—all the legalities and fact-checking, things that they'd gone over plenty of times before, and yet every new contractor felt the need to scrutinize all the details from scratch. On the one hand, it made sense. You wanted to make sure you weren't hiring a bunch of fakes, not with how much money was on the line. On the other hand, it was so goddamn tedious.

Their current contractor had shuffled through the papers for what felt like hours, occasionally casting their group a glance as if that would somehow help. Once, a contractor had accused Sapnap of being an impostor because "he didn't look like a Sapnap". Whatever that was supposed to mean. And Sapnap was a made-up name, anyway. That particular case had been pretty funny if a huge waste of time.

At times, George wondered if it was all for a show. Some sort of intimidation tactic. Had to at least appear more "prestigious" and "serious" than all those lowly public bounties. So word would get around. No one wanted to run a shady private hunt in this business, as... counterintuitive as that would seem. One snitch, and it was a sure way to lose your permit to legally hunt people. Ha.

Maybe if he ever got bored enough, he could try doing that. Sounded like fun.

But, anyway. Clearly, this place worked differently, considering they hadn't even *done* anything.

It was no secret that there were some questionable towns scattered around the Wilderness. Even in some countries, chaos reigned barely checked (case in point: whatever the hell was happening over at Hypixel. The fact that they'd visited the place four times and twice some uprising happening was amusing if not a bit concerning). It was the sort of life around these parts, though they usually tried to steer away from any *particularly* questionable spots.

And, well, to Sapnap's credit, this town had rung a few alarm bells right from the start.

It wasn't unusual for independent towns to be fortified, with how dangerous the outside could get at times, but this one's seemed a bit overkill with their oddly tall walls and spiked tops which, on closer inspection, looked newer than the rest of the structures. The guards by the entrance, however, barely cast them a glance as they walked past, and the clash in defences was... jarring, to an extent. But, hey, they needed to stock up on supplies and the compass pointed this way, too, so, whatever. Not the strangest thing they'd seen.

But then there were the people. Sunset had passed when they'd arrived, a time when most retreated home, and yet the streets were bustling, strange energy in the air. Tingling with something electric, charged with anticipation. Folk were scurrying to and fro, hushed whispering mixed with giggles following them. Some, however, were frightful, ushering children inside and locking doors behind them, blinds going down a second later. Obviously, they'd walked into something, as per it was usual, though this time it felt a bit... different. Off in a way George couldn't pinpoint.

"This place is fucking weird," Sapnap muttered, glancing around as they made their way through the lively streets. "I'm getting a bad vibe."

“Language, Sapnap, and maybe they’re just preparing for a festival or something?” Bad suggested. “They seem very excited.”

“Uh-huh, sure, you wanna guess where I’ve seen looks like that before? Fucking *Balkat*.”

“To be fair, you think every odd community is a cult,” George remarked.

“It’s because they *are*—”

A loud and prolonged bell rang through the air, cutting Sapnap off. The people around hushed and whipped towards the sound. As gleeful grins stretched across their faces, they started rushing towards it, pushing past the three of them without any regard. Their group shuffled out of the way closer to the buildings and glanced at each other.

“So, are we bailing?”

“I’m kinda curious, actually,” George said, watching as people flooded towards the town center. “Kinda wanna see what all the fuss is about.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to take a look, right?” Bad offered with an uncertain smile.

Sapnap levelled them with a hard look. “If we end up getting sacrificed, I’m killing both of you.”

When they’d reached the centre, it was fully crowded, people gathering all along the circular open area. A wooden podium stood in the middle of it, tall black candles lining the edge as everything around drowned in shadows. For the moment, it was empty, though everyone’s eyes were glued to it, sparkling with anticipation. The three of them stayed by the sides, close to a street for a quick retreat, and they weren’t the only wary ones around. There were small groups that were slinking farther from the crowd, observing them with a mistrustful look. Oddly enough, they were dressed differently, with more earthly colors and tighter fabrics, though whether it was the crowd that was different or them, it wasn’t possible to tell. Almost as if they didn’t belong to the same community.

Which, well, wasn’t surprising, given the varying levels of enthusiasm, but strange for a town this size.

Before George could follow that thought, loud cheering and clapping brought his attention back to the middle. There, a man was climbing up to the podium, and George had to squint a bit to make out his features. Even from this far, he could tell the guy was very tall. Lean, too, with a long brown overcoat that only highlighted his lankiness. Curly hair framed his bespeckled face, one that was adorned with a dazzling smile as he took his place upfront, the flames from the candles illuminating him from below like from some sort of horror play.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the moment you’ve all been waiting for!” the man spoke up as he threw his arms out, his rich voice echoing through the entire place with startling clarity. Cheering followed his greeting, to which he laughed. “Oh, it’s good to be back, it’s good to be back. It’s been too long, hasn’t it? I don’t know about you, but I’d gotten quite bored by now. Excitement! Drama! *That’s* what we live for, right?!”

Gleeful shouts and shrieks boomed through the crowd almost enough to deafen. George exchanged glances with Sapnap who lifted his brows in a bemused manner. “*What was that about this not being a cult?*” George only rolled his eyes in response and looked back to the showman on stage. Whatever this was, it pulled his attention. He wouldn’t say it out loud, but he couldn’t help wondering where this all was going. His interest was piqued.

The man chuckled at the enthusiasm, “I know, I know, I’m dying to get this show on the road, too.

I won't dawdle for any longer, so, without further ado, I'm your host, Wilbur Soot, and it's my pleasure to introduce you all to the 7th Player Challenges!"

As more cheers erupted, George lingered on the name of this... event, or whatever, as well as the man. Somewhere at the back of George's head, they rang a bell, though he couldn't place quite place it. The rule of thumb was, though, that if something rang a bell, it was usually a warning one.

Not that George had a good track record of listening to warning bells.

"Now, last time we went a little crazy, a little wild," the man, Wilbur, continued once the crowd settled down, clasping his hands behind his back. "So, to avoid more unnecessary arson, this time I've arranged something a bit less straightforward, a bit more lowkey, if you will. Something that'll make you use your nogging for once." He tapped against his temple, grinning. "I know how much you've all been begging me for a puzzle, so, this challenge's theme is going to be..." He paused for dramatic effect, and the crowd held a collective breath. "A murder mystery."

A resounding 'Oooo' travelled through the square, one that Wilbur was quick to interrupt, "However! There's a twist." His grin stretched to reveal white teeth, bright even in the low candlelight. "The murder hasn't yet happened."

George blinked. Yeah, that... *was* a twist. What kind of gameshow had they stumbled into?

"Fun, yeah?" Wilbur giggled. "So, your challenge is as follows—" He held up a finger. "Find out who's going to be killed—" Another finger. "—how they're going to die—" A third one. "—and who's the culprit. Stop the murder in time, and you win!" he proclaimed, throwing his hand out. "Let the victim die, and, well..." His smile turned sickly sweet, eyes glinting red. "You all know what happens."

The crowd let out a low whistle, the air trembling with foreboding energy. The mistrusting people by the outskirts were glancing around, nervous, though their friends only shrugged.

"What? What happens?" Sapnap muttered under his breath, voicing the hanging confusion.

"They lose?.." Bad offered, awkward.

Sapnap rolled his eyes. "Yeah, no shit, Captain Obvious."

"Hey now, no need to be mean! I don't know either!"

"But no worries!" Wilbur continued, cheery, shutting them up. "You're smart cookies, I'm sure it won't have to come to that. Now! Listen up." He clapped once. "Your time limit is five days, starting from tonight. Look for clues, follow the leads, bring in suspects. I'll be among you, observing, judging, and maybe offering hints if I like you enough," he said, flashing a sharp grin. "I'm sure you're all dying to begin, so, here is your first clue—" He waited for quiet to settle, hands clasped together, patient. Once the murmuring died down, he leaned over the candles, gnarly shadows casting over his face. "Ashes often have more stories to tell than the walls before them."

George frowned, thrown off. What was that even supposed to mean? How can a pile of dust have anything to say? Unless you wrote something in them, then, yeah, maybe, but you could write stuff on walls, too, so that didn't make much sense.

Damn. First hint, and he was already lost.

The sentiment, however, didn't seem to be shared by everyone, as some turned to their friends, eyes wide and sparkling, already chattering among themselves in hushed voices. Movement

sparked within the crowd, the barely contained buzzing threatening to break through like a flood. On instinct, George stepped back in case it rushed their way.

“But, before you go!” Wilbur cleared his throat, for the moment halting any impending chaos. “There’s one more piece of information you might find useful. Besides the clues, there’s also one potential witness. You all know him, you all love him—my precious baby brother.” Part of the crowd erupted in cheers and coos, while the other groaned, and Wilbur only chuckled at the reaction, amused. “Yes, that little rascal. However, the problem that he is, he’s run away from me,” he sighed dramatically. “I know he’s somewhere within these walls, but I can’t seem to find him anywhere! A bit suspicious, if you’d ask me, but, well, you know how he is. Find him, though, and you might get some valuable information. If you manage to get him to talk, that is,” he laughed, shaking his head. “In any case, I want to have him back, so anyone who manages to bring him to me may get a secret clue, too.” He winked. “With that said, I don’t want to keep you any longer, so, I wish you all the best of luck, and let the hunt begin!”

Just like that, the flood gates opened. People rushed from the square to all sides, and the three of them had to practically glue themselves to the building behind to avoid getting swept up.

“Well, uh, this seems like fun,” Bad chuckled sheepishly as people scurried past them. “It sure is bringing everyone together!”

“What do they even win?” George asked. “Like, what’s the prize? The guy didn’t say anything about it.”

“Maybe it’s also a ‘if you know, you know’ sort of deal,” Sapnap huffed. “Kinda don’t wanna stick around to find out what happens if they lose, though. The dude gave me the creeps.”

“I thought he was very charismatic! He seemed to have a real way with words.”

“Bad. He *screamed* cult leader.”

“W-Well, to be fair...” He trailed off for a second. “They are usually quite charismatic.”

George rolled his eyes. “Whatever, who cares. What are we doing?”

“Don’t know about you two, but I want out of this murder show.”

“Do you really think someone could actually die?” Bad asked, a tinge of concern lacing his voice.

“Don’t know, don’t care, not our problem. Let’s leave.”

All things considered, that’d be the smart thing to do. While trying to solve a mystery did sound interesting, the people involved were a little *too* enthusiastic about it, and George didn’t know what to make of the *first* clue, so. Not like he’d be able to contribute much, anyway.

Besides, Sapnap had a point. Whatever losing meant, he wasn’t too keen on figuring out.

There was one issue, though.

The gates were locked.

Sapnap kicked at the thick metal doors in frustration, but they didn’t move as much as an inch. There were still guards posted around, and all they did was observe the three of them with thinly veiled amusement. Bad had tried to ask them to let them out, to no avail. ‘*No one’s to enter or leave until the event is over*’, or something. That sure didn’t set off any more alarm bells, yeah,

definitely. Frankly, it was an orchestra of bells by that point, but, by that point, they were locked inside it.

The tall walls with spiked tops now made more sense.

“I *told* you we should leave while we still could!” Sappnap groaned as they slumped away from the unbudging gates. This part of the town was quieter than the rest, though there were still people running around here and there, throwing open doors and finding ways into the sewers. George shuddered at the thought.

“It’s unfortunate, but we can just wait it out?” Bad said. “Or find some other way to escape?”

“Can we leave this for tomorrow? I’m starving and about to fall asleep,” George muttered.

“Oh, sorry, I forgot Georgie needs his *beauty sleep*. ”

Despite their arguing, they eventually made their way to an inn, one run by a particularly bored older man. There, they got the cheapest room, with nothing more than three beds and a single window. George claimed a side one before either of the others could and flopped down with a sigh. Zoning out whatever conversation was going on, he rummaged through his bag for something to munch on before he dropped dead for the night. Eventful days always drained him, and maybe he’d be able to think better, too, if he was well-rested. That clue kept replaying over and over in his head like a broken record, making less sense with each cycle. Perhaps by tomorrow, there would be more to go off on, and then George could—

—do nothing. He wasn’t supposed to do anything, actually. Finding a way out of this town or waiting it out was the plan, not *participating*. Neither Bad nor Sappnap seemed keen on it, either, so. Whatever. It was probably a stupid game, anyway.

His fingers ghosted over the smooth casing of their compass in his bag, and he paused, in thought. Slowly, he took it out. It’d become a bit of a habit lately. Just looking at the arrow move. An odd sort of reassurance. The last time he’d checked it, it was pointing in the general direction of this town, though there was no real way of telling how far away it was. Now, however, the arrow was turned the opposite way.

George stared at it.

Huh.

“Actually, the air here sucks, I’m gonna go outside for a bit,” George said, throwing the compass back into his bag and standing up.

“Weren’t you complaining literally a minute ago how you’re about to pass out?”

George shrugged, already by the door. “Changed my mind. I won’t be long.”

He hoped so, anyway. The last thing he needed was for either of them to go looking for him.

The streets were still as lively as they’d left them. If they only had a few days to solve this mystery, it’d make sense they’d use all the time they had. Besides, the excitement at the start of any event was always at its highest. George wasn’t a stranger to working through nights, too, usually during stakeouts or when Sappnap decided they needed more ‘practice’ and would go out monster hunting. For the hell of it, all caution thrown to the wind, and George with Bad had no choice but to follow. One time, he’d lose an arm and it’d be deserved.

Quietly, George wandered through the streets, keeping to the shadows as he glanced around. No one paid him any mind, too engrossed in their ‘hunt’. Idly, he entertained the thought of joining them, *for the hell of it*. That Wilbur guy was interesting, too—maybe he could catch sight of him around here somewhere. Listen to what more he had to say. Again, he wouldn’t admit it out loud, but Bad did have a point with him and his way of words. There was a... captivating quality to them.

Maybe it wouldn’t be too bad to stick around for a little bit.

He didn’t get to linger on that thought for long before something wrapped around his wrist and yanked him into a narrow alley, startling the hell out of him. He was about to grab his dagger before his other wrist was snatched, too, and he got pinned against the wall. Before he could get any ideas of retaliation, his eyes focused on the dark form of his attacker, and, instead, a scowl stretched across his face.

“Oh my god, do *not* do that,” he hissed, expertly masking the sudden thundering in his chest. Disregarding... other things, getting taken by surprise to this extent couldn’t be good for his health.

If Dream wasn’t careful, he’d soon get a very nasty bill.

The bastard, however, had the audacity to *laugh* at him. “Why not? It’s kinda funny how familiar this is, don’t you think?”

Heat rising, George tried not to think about the last time they were in this position. Or, well, he did, he did too much, actually, because what did it matter at this point, right?

Speaking of.

It had taken George approximately 4 days, 5 hours, and 37 minutes to come to the intelligent conclusion of ‘*whatever*’.

He’d checked. They had a clock.

It had come a point where the mental struggle just became too annoying to deal with. He’d thought he’d gotten over it, he really, really had. At this point in life, he’d gotten pretty good at ignoring problems until they solved on their own, so, hey, he couldn’t be blamed for applying the same logic here, too. If you pretended you didn’t see it, it didn’t exist. Flawless reasoning.

Yeah. One issue, though.

The problem, apparently, liked to get right up in his face. Case in point, right now.

And it had come a point where he couldn’t be bothered to shove it away.

There was no denying that George acted stupid whenever Dream got too close. Absolutely idiotic, honestly. Could he really be blamed, though? Was he the one at fault that he couldn’t think straight (ha) whenever Dream was involved? No, it wasn’t. It was all Dream’s fault, actually. He should take more accountability for it. Making George act so unprofessional whenever he opened his stupid mouth, what was wrong with him?

(He’d told Dream so when he’d next met him (read: sneaked off). The idiot had the gall to laugh at him.

Gods, he was so annoying. So incredibly, stupidly, frustratingly annoying. Almost made George

wish he hadn't settled for that stupid truce. Almost.)

So, in conclusion, George was the victim here. And he was entitled to some compensation for it.

That was the elaborated-on conclusion he'd come to after pulling himself back and forth for hours. Clearly, whatever was making him act so dumb wasn't going away on its own, and kicking himself for it wouldn't make it better, either. He'd tried. He could rationalize for days, convince himself he was just confusing this... whatever for something else, but all that bastard had to do was show his *stupid* self and, suddenly, it was head empty hours.

So, no, rationalizing didn't work. Pretending everything was cool and normal didn't, either. Which left him with the wise words of his mother: "If you're craving sugar, get some sugar, it's fine, you'll live." He still wasn't too sure about that last part in his case, but the point stood regardless. If ignoring his wants didn't work, then indulging in them for a bit might just do the trick of helping him get over it. Get it out of his system, as they'd say. He got bored easily enough, anyway. All he needed to do was satisfy this craving and he'd be golden.

None of this meant his main goal changed. He was just... taking a small detour.

Yeah.

In the meantime, though? Well, who cared.

...George could probably name a couple of people, but what they didn't know didn't hurt them. And he was determined to keep it that way until he got over this hitch.

No one needed to know, so.

It all happened in dark alleys and secluded caves, anyway.

Again, case in point.

"Maybe to you," George said, dry. "It's annoying."

Dream chuckled, easing his grip on George's hands. His lack of gloves didn't go unnoticed, and George didn't make a move to pull away. "Not my fault you're just— waltzing around the streets like that. Don't you know how *dangerous* it is?" He leaned in closer, voice dropping. "To just walk around in the middle of the night, all alone?"

George suppressed the urge to swallow. Instead, he levelled Dream with a stare, licking his lips. "I don't know. Is it?"

"Very. You need to be more careful, y'know," he hummed, cocking his head. "Who knows who might get ideas and snatch you away."

"Awh, Dream, how nice of you to care," George dragged. "I can handle myself just fine, though."

"That so?"

Within a second, George slipped his hands from Dream's grip and latched onto the front of his jacket, twisting them around and slamming him against the wall. He let a smile twist at the muffled gasp.

"*You* need to be more careful," he said, eyes narrowed. "Getting locked in with a bunch of hunters, seems like a stupid move even for you."

“How was I supposed to know they’d lock us up?” Dream huffed, though made no move to break free. Instead, he snaked his arms around George’s lower waist. “And I’m not locked in with you. You’re locked in with *me*.”

“Oh no, I’m *so* scared. Whatever will we do with the big, bad, scary Dream?”

He chuckled, toying with the hem of George’s jacket. “I am very big, bad and scary, that’s true. You *should* be afraid.”

“I’m positively quivering in my boots right now.”

A particularly loud shout from down the street cut off whatever Dream was planning on responding with, and the two of them glanced in its direction, for a moment taken out of it.

“They’re really going at it, huh?” George said with a hum. “Wonder what this thing is all about, anyway.”

“No idea. Tried to ask around when I first got here, but they all just...” He trailed off, and George could imagine him scrunching up his face. He thought Dream had to be expressive. “I dunno. They were— weird about it. All *Wilbur this*, *Wilbur that*, like they were all in love with him or something.”

“I mean,” George drawled, observing the scurrying people. “He did seem pretty charming. It probably isn’t difficult to pull in people with a voice like *that*.”

Dream was silent for a beat. Then, a shrug too late. “I guess.”

It was impossible to miss the dryness. A grin pulled at the corner of George’s lips, a strange sort of fluttering sparking in his chest, but he kept it down. Instead, he released his jacket and slowly wrapped his arms around Dream’s neck, turning back to look at him with a raised brow. “You *guess*? Did you not hear him speak? So charismatic, so *articulate*. Impossible to look away, honestly.”

Dream huffed, the hold around George’s waist tightening. “He’s just a showman, it’s all a— a— a *facade*. I bet he cries himself to sleep at night.”

“What? No way,” he laughed. “I was actually hoping I’d see him around after that speech. Have a chat, maybe. He seemed like a... very interesting guy. Maybe he’d even give me a hint if I asked nicely.”

“He’d be stupid to refuse,” Dream muttered.

“Oh, so you think I should? Go out looking for him?” George glanced away from him to the streets. “He’s probably around here somewhere, I’m pretty sure I could still catch him.”

Dream sputtered in response, pulling George in closer, the grin that was threatening to break out now free. “No, that’d be— Absolutely *not*, he’s— no, he’s clearly a madman, there’s no telling what crazy shit he could say or— or— or do, or— I don’t know, just, no way.”

The fluttering was now lodged into his throat and between his ribs, and George ran his fingers against the back of Dream’s exposed neck, leaning in. “Well, who knows? Maybe I should go and find out.”

A low noise of disapproval sounded in Dream’s throat, his fingers digging into George’s sides. Just from thinking about the expression he must be making under that stupid mask of his was enough



for giddiness to rise, and George had to fight to keep the giggles down. “No.”

“Why not?”

“He’s a fucking *twig*, seems real self-centered, too, he probably wouldn’t even— He’s really not *that* interesting, either, just going around spewing bullshit. A really bad choice in— in everything, honestly.”

“Hm. He’s tall, though.”

“*I’m* tall!” Dream blurted, indignant. “That’s not— That’s just a shit argument.”

George tilted his head at him, grinning. “So, what, you think you’re better than him?”

“Actually, I know I am.”

“You really are sickingly overconfident,” George said with a huff. He fingers caught the ends of Dream’s hair, and he twirled the lock around, dropping his voice, “Prove it.”

“With pleasure,” Dream muttered, and, without warning, took hold of George’s hips and hoisted him up.

Laughing in surprise, George wrapped his legs around his middle as Dream retreated deeper into the alley, far from any lingering torch lights. With the dark sky overcast and the rising moon obscured, George was soon left near blind. Electric tingling buzzed all along his skin, sending his heart closer and closer to the edge, as if this was the first time all over again, as if he didn’t know exactly what to expect. And as he got trapped between the wall and Dream’s body, all-encompassing and so satisfyingly overwhelming, his tongue flicked out over his lips, the pounding in his throat reaching a crescendo. A second more, and his patience would have run out, and he would have torn away that *stupid* mask himself, but.

A second more, and Dream beat him to it, the shadows leaving everything to interpretation for a short moment before his mouth crashed over George’s. And maybe it was too harsh of a description, but the burning vigor with which his lips moved was nothing short of devastation. George wound his arms tighter around his neck, bringing them impossibly close, as even an inch between them was a gaping abyss, one that was sure to drive him insane. Yet another thing he wouldn’t say out loud, but being held up like this, against the wall by Dream’s sheer strength, was sending him over further than it had any right to. At that moment, there was nothing more difficult than resisting to melt in his hold, and he wouldn’t dare to even entertain the idea.

Pressing him against the wall, one of his hands still on George’s thigh, Dream roughly slid the other up George’s side, dragging his jacket’s material along his skin. It found purchase at the back of his head, tangling in his hair, and the sensation of twisting sent shivers all along his spine, down its very marrow. All around, Dream was all around, his presence like an anchor dragging George down under, until water filled his lungs, until he couldn’t remember how to breathe anymore. He exhaled a short, shuddering sigh between them, and Dream was quick to chase it, catching his bottom lip between his teeth. Giggles rose in George’s throat, the electric excitement sparking his every nerve to life. Dream chased that, too, not letting them leave, drinking up every little sound with his mouth. And yet, George couldn’t stop.

Once giddiness took hold of him, he couldn’t stop grinning.

“You’re so…” George whispered in between kisses, breathless, barely containing the bubbling laughter. “...easy.”

Dream huffed against his lips, angling his head so he could drag them down under George's jaw, hot puffs on heated skin, sending his vision spinning. "And you're a *brat*." He nipped at the junction, and George couldn't keep down the trembling exhale. "Trying to get me all..."

"All what?" he mumbled. A smirk tugged at his lips. "Don't tell me you're jealous, Dream."

It was so, so easy. How hadn't he tried it before?

"I'm not," Dream muttered, releasing his hair in favor of trailing it down to George's jaw, cradling it as he pulled back just the tiniest bits. In the dark, he couldn't make anything out, though there seemed to be... a faint, blue glow where his eyes were supposed to be. Huh. "You like me too much to run away."

"Hm. Whatever you say, Dream."

"It is whatever I say."

"You are so conceited it's not even funny," George said dryly.

Dream hummed, caressing his cheek with his thumb, before he leaned in to kiss at the corner of his mouth, whispering, "Conceited, overconfident; anything else you'd like to throw at me?"

"Annoying," George exhaled. "Arrogant." Dream moved to catch his lips, slow. "Stupid." Picking up speed. "Unbearable, an abso—" He pushed in deeper, closer, more demanding, leaving George gasping between his advances. "—lute *idiot*."

Maybe there were more synonyms for 'bastard' floating around, and he knew there were, he had a whole collection reserved specifically for Dream, but all coherent thoughts stumbled over each other, fell, leaving nothing but an incomprehensible frenzy in their wake. Dream was ruthless, merciless, not giving him a moment to rest, determined to prove something that George had never cared about. He was more than happy to pretend otherwise, though, if only to get a reaction, if only to see how much he could push, how much he could taunt before Dream gave. It was funny, watching him get riled up so stupidly easy. The way he held George painfully close, tight against himself, as if they were on display for the whole world to see, as if he wanted nothing more than to scream for everyone to know just *who* was holding him so.

It was fun, and it gave George a high he'd never experienced before. The feeling of being *wanted*. Sure, the circumstances were maybe a bit ridiculous, and maybe, in the long run, it'd cause more trouble than it was worth, but, right now, the long run seemed impossibly far away. Right now, for whatever reason, he was wanted, and he'd be stupid not to take advantage of that.

Especially if it was *Dream*.

"Sounds like—" Dream murmured between pulling back and in. "—you really hate me, huh?"

It was Dream. It was Dream. How was it Dream?

"I do." He unwrapped one of his arms from Dream's neck and buried it in his hair, carding through the thick locks. "I can't stand you, actually."

Dream chuckled, a breathless sort of things, and George thought he was falling. "You wound me, Georgie."

"Good. Be wounded."

He could feel Dream grin against him, the smug idiot, and George had half a mind to bite hard enough to draw blood.

But it was easy to forgive when, a second of Dream's hands on him later, he'd already forgotten about it.

Like this, senses overwhelmed and mind scrambled, it was near impossible to be aware of anything outside. Yet nagging prickled at the back of his head, unwelcomed and so annoying. Nagging that he didn't know how much time had passed, that he *had* to keep track of it. It was all incredible and amazing and great and so easily ruined by carelessness.

It was so stupidly difficult to care, though.

"I should— get going," George managed to mumble out, trying to put some space between them, a task in vain with Dream chasing his every move. "They might go looking."

"Mm, don't care."

"Yes, you do," he sighed, twisting his head out of Dream's grasp and dropping it against his shoulder. "We're literally locked in here for, like, five more days, or something."

Dream hummed, trailing his lips against the side of George's neck, peppering it with kisses. "Or maybe they're smart and will crack the case tomorrow. Who knows."

"Maybe," George said with a huff. "It actually sounds kinda fun, but I wouldn't even know where to begin. I mean, the first clue just doesn't make any sense to me. What are you supposed to do with that?"

Dream fell silent. A few seconds passed before he straightened, letting clarity slowly return to George. "Well," he started, slow, uncharacteristically uncertain. Curious, George, lifted his head, too, as if he was suddenly able to make out anything more than a general outline. "There *was* a fire here some days ago. Burned down some, I dunno, important building. Might be something to do with that?"

"Oh." Now that caught his attention. "That's... interesting. You know where that was?"

A pause. "Yeah," he said. Stepping back from the wall, Dream released George back onto the ground. Instead of letting go of him, though, Dream took hold of his hand and tugged him farther into the alley. "C'mon, I'll show you."

Without protest, George followed his lead, trying to ignore the way his heart thundered at the feel of Dream's interlocked fingers with his. Such a casual gesture, as if he hadn't given it a second thought. And why should he? Of all things, *that* wasn't something to be bashful about. Still, it kept his mind fumbling, making him overly aware of his body and the points of contact. Once again, he was reminded that Dream wasn't wearing his gloves, as if he didn't have enough things to hyperfocus on.

And Dream dared to accuse *him* of... something.

Then again, maybe it was out of necessity. In these cracks between the buildings where no light reached, George was practically blind as a bat. Dream, however, didn't have that issue, and navigated through the narrow paths with ease, pulling George along, tugging him out of the way of any stray trash or steps. If George hadn't thought much of the weak blue glow before, now he could definitely put two and two together. It almost made him huff; it was impossible to catch Dream unprepared, huh?

Eventually, they'd made it out into one of the main streets, people still hurrying down it back and forth. Despite the low flickering lamp posts casting a glow over the area, Dream didn't let go of him, and George couldn't find it in him to protest that. He was back to wearing his mask, though now he also pulled the hood over his head and stayed by the sidelines, dragging George along. A spike of anxiety shot through him at being out in the open like this. While the chances of Sapnap or Bad being out and about somewhere around here were low, they weren't zero. The smart thing to do would be to separate and head straight back, but would it really hurt to explore a bit if they were careful? Dream had a knack for avoiding attention when he wanted to, so that had to count for something, right?

"I think it's around here," Dream said, turning a corner. It led to a square, smaller than at the town centre, and at the other side from them, as Dream had guessed, there was a pile of dark rubble, a gaping hole in between two other buildings. Even from afar, charring was visible on the white bricks of the debris' neighbours, though they'd somehow avoided the same fate. A small crowd was gathered beside it, some amid the destroyed building, rummaging through what was left.

"Seems like a lot of people had the same idea," George remarked. He crinkled his nose. "So, are you supposed to, like, dig through the ashes or something?"

"Maybe. Or maybe it's a metaphor," he said with a shrug.

"Huh. What kind of building was it?"

"I don't know, George, I got here just a bit earlier than you all did," he chuckled. It'd been a while since Dream had last questioned how they were always on his tail. Maybe he had fewer reasons to care about it. "Haven't really uncovered all the town's mysteries yet."

"That's disappointing, Dream. I expected better from you."

Dream laughed at that. "Sorry, sorry, my bad. I should have— just *known* everything already, huh?"

"Yes, actually. You should have also already solved this mystery. You've had, like, what, two hours?" he huffed. "You're so bad at this. What am I even doing here with you."

"Oh my god, you're so annoying," he chuckled, before he pulled George in, startling him, and trapped him against his chest, burying his face in the crook of his neck. The cool surface of the mask clashed with George's heated skin in an unexpectedly... pleasant way. A whine sounded in Dream's throat, and George rolled his eyes. "Would it kill you to appreciate me more?"

"Hm. Yes."

"You're so cruel," he fake-sniffed. George couldn't keep down a grin at that.

"Awh, are you gonna cry?" George mock-cooed. "Are poor Dream's feelings hurt?"

"Very hurt, yes. You've hurt me."

"Too bad. Suck it up."

Dream sighed deeply, pulling his head back. A twinge of nerves twisted in George's chest, slight worry that maybe he'd pushed it too far. Without seeing Dream's face, it was often difficult to tell what he was thinking, especially when he went all silent on him. Like right now, as he just stood there, looking at George, his arms intertwined over his lower back. Nothing signalled that he was actually upset, and yet anxiety wouldn't stop gnawing at him. So, before he could think better and

realize what a stupid idea that was, he reached up and pecked the front of his mask.

There. George hadn't meant it. That had to be clear now.

Pointedly ignoring the rising to his face heat and the way he could *feel* Dream staring at him, he cleared his throat. "I really should be going now. Thanks for, um, showing me..." He glanced in the rubble's direction. "...that."

Dream didn't respond for a few beats before a small jolt shook his body. "Y-Yeah, no problem. Thought I'd— Yeah." He nodded. "You're welcome."

George nodded, too. "Okay."

"Yup."

"You can, uh, let go of me now."

"Oh— Oh yeah, sorry."

With that, Dream unwrapped his arms and took a step back, showing his now-free hands into his pockets. "I'll see you around, then?"

George shrugged, feigning apathy at the bitterness of lost contact. "If we don't get out by then, sure."

"Right, okay. Yeah."

George turned to leave, lifting a hand. "Bye."

"Bye."

As he made his way back to the inn, as he climbed the stairs, as he shrugged off Sapnap's questioning and zoned out their chattering, he couldn't shake the feeling he was getting himself involved in more things than he'd bargained for.

## Chapter End Notes

A mystery?? In *my dnf fic*?? unheard of

Okay, but I actually have something I wanna ask of you. Here's the general plan of this fic so far—the next chapter is gonna be the second part to this one, then we'll have one or two more side-story chapters with guests (think of the hypixel!Techno one), and *then* the last five are gonna be, what I like to call it, the End Arc, though it's, again, five chapters lol. Basically, an actual arc that'll bring this story to a close.

And this is where you can come in!! Once we get into the End Arc, it'll get a bit more serious and it'll be hard to break apart, so, if anyone wants to see more goofy and silly times with specific people or events or locations (anything, really, again, think of the hypixel!Techno part), you can basically put in a request/suggestion lol. In the comments or my asks or my dms, I don't care haha. If not, then I'll proceed with my initial plan :)) Just thought that since this is such a fun world I could give you all a chance to contribute something to it :D I make no promises, though!! I might not feel

motivated enough, so, again, it's just a possibility :'))

(don't ask for hypixel!Techno though bsdfhbjsd I do have Plans for him lol)

but anyway!! lmk what you thought and i will love u

[my tumblr :\)\)\)](#) come say hi i need attention

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!